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**Towards a Truly Catholic and a Truly Asian Church: An  
Asian Wayfaring Theology of the Federation of Asian  
Bishops' Conferences (FABC) 1970-2012**

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Academic dissertation to be publicly discussed, by due permission of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki in Auditorium XII, on the 23rd of May 2018 at 12 o'clock.

## *FABC Ruby Jubilee Prayer (2012)*

*God ever faithful, we praise you for your abiding presence  
in our pilgrimage in this land of Asia, hallowed by the life  
and mission of your Son Jesus Christ.*

*We thank you for the mysterious presence of your Spirit  
in the depth and breadth of the spiritual quest of our people,  
in their enduring cultures and values, and in the struggles of the poor.*

*We raise our hearts in gratitude for the gift of the Church in Asia, the little flock you tend  
with provident care in her mission of proclaiming your Gift,  
Jesus Christ the Giver of Life.*

*Father, we thank you for the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences,  
an instrument of communion you have granted us for the past forty years.  
Your Spirit accompanied us in our common search for the paths of mission in our  
continent.*

*As we celebrate your blessing,  
renew your Church in Asia with a fresh outpouring of your Spirit.  
Make us grow in greater unity; rekindle the fire of your Spirit  
to be credible bearers of the Good News of Jesus.*

*Empower us as we "go" on the roads of Asia, that in inter-religious dialogue  
and cultural harmony, in commitment to the poor and the excluded,  
we may courageously tell the story of Jesus.*

*May the peoples of Asia, especially the poor, find in Him their liberator.  
May our world, broken by sin find in Him the Reconciler,  
and the wounded earth find its Healer.*

*May all recognize Him as the giver of the fullness of Life.  
Amen.*

**ISBN 978-951-51-4178-1 (nid.)  
ISBN 978-951-51-4179-8 (PDF)**

**Unigrafia  
Helsinki 2018**

## **Abstract**

The present study analyses the contextual theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). The FABC can validly be considered as the most authoritative representative of the Catholic Church in Asia since the time of the inception of the FABC, which took place after Pope Paul VI's 1970 visit to Manila.

The method of this study is systematic analysis and critical evaluation of the relevant FABC documents in order to locate the constitutive underpinnings of the theology of the FABC. The sources for this study consist of the most important documents produced by the FABC in the period from 1970 to 2012.

The present study argues that the FABC's contextual theology can best be understood as an interplay between the traditional sources of Catholic faith (Scripture and Tradition) their magisterial interpretation (with special reference to the documents of the Second Vatican Council) and Asian contextual realities (Asian religions, Asian cultures, and Asian socio-political realities, especially the poor). The importance of Vatican II is significant; the FABC could not have come into existence without the reforms and openness introduced by the Council. The FABC's theological orientations can therefore be described as Asia's continuing Vatican II. The significance of Vatican II is especially indicated in the FABC documents by means of direct references to several Vatican II documents and in the development of the FABC theology which sees itself as initiated and motivated by the Vatican II documents.

The approach of the FABC to theology is primarily inductive; this approach is discussed in Chapter 2, which analyses the concepts of "being Asian" and "Asianness". The FABC's clearly expressed goal for the Church in Asia is "to become truly Asian in all things". In pursuit of this goal, the Asian bishops especially employ the concept of Asianness. In using this broad term, at certain points the FABC can be viewed as representing an essentialist understanding of this concept. On the other hand, in choosing Asianness as an important concept and goal, the FABC belongs to a larger theological trend of emerging Asianness, which can be considered as one of the most significant theological trends today. In the thought of the FABC, one major component of Asianness is the concept of harmony. The FABC argues that harmony is a significant and inherently element in the process of becoming truly Asian.

The importance of Asianness for the theology of the FABC is also shown in Chapter 3, which provides an analysis of the concept of truth in the FABC theology. The FABC strives for an Asian understanding of truth, which the FABC argues is universal, practical and non-exclusivist. In this discussion of the understanding of truth the Asian bishops introduce a "wayfaring" aspect into theology, which the bishops claim is a dimension which is significantly present in Asian theology. The concept of wayfaring theology implies a process during which the Church's understanding of truth and faith will increase. In the opinion of the FABC, the "wayfaring theology" represents a genuine Catholic articulation of faith. This kind of articulation of faith and theology is both truly Asian and truly Catholic.

Chapter 4 analyses Asian contextual realities: the religions, cultures, and socio-political realities of Asia, especially the poor. The FABC welcomes all these realities as dialogue partners with the Church. In this dialogue, Asian contextual realities are accepted as theological sources (*loci*) in addition to the traditional sources of Scripture and Tradition. The dialogue with these contextual realities becomes a mutually enriching process in which both the Church and Asian contextual realities learn from each other and contribute to each other. Regarding the relationship with Asian religions, the FABC represents an understanding of that relationship which can be termed “dialogical fulfilment, in which the Church also can learn from other religions, and the adherents of religions are accepted as co-pilgrims on the way towards the Kingdom of God. In addition, even after the introduction of the Gospel the salvific function of these religions remains. In this understanding the FABC represents a different point of view than that of the Roman Magisterium. However, in the last analysis, an inclusivist undertone remains in the theology of religions of the FABC.

The FABC’s understanding of Asian cultures is predominantly positive; at certain points the bishops even evince a kind of cultural romanticism. On the other hand, the bishops also provide critical means for the dialogue between the Gospel and cultures: this dialogue is intended to lead to inculturation. In order for inculturation to be successful, the process of inculturation needs the help of the Paschal Mystery, which means that both the Church and cultures need to be purified by the Gospel of Christ. When the Gospel meets a culture, something “new” is born out of the encounter, but the “new” essentially grows out of both the Gospel and a culture. This “new” must be faithful to the genuine Catholic tradition and at the same time be relevant and capable of making the Gospel come alive in various Asian contexts.

The third important contextual reality for the FABC are the poor of Asia, who are of indispensable help for the Church so that it can truly become an Asian Church. The Church must dialogue with the poor and give up its authoritarianism and also become the Church of the poor -- and even a poor Church.

Chapter 5 analyses the ecclesiology of the FABC. In order to become a truly Asian Catholic Church, the Church must adopt an Asian face of Jesus. Presenting Jesus in an Asian way implies using Asian cultural concepts, terms and symbols, and in a manner which resonates with the vision of life of the peoples of Asia. Accepting the Church’s traditional Christological definitions, the FABC strives to present a Jesus who is not a stranger to the Asian continent. An Asian Catholic Church will then do its mission in Asia to (*ad*) Asian peoples, among (*inter*) Asian peoples and with (*cum*) Asian peoples.

The title of the present study, *Towards a Truly Catholic and a Truly Asian Church : An Asian Wayfaring Theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) 1970-2012*, reflects the understanding of the Asian Catholic bishops that their theology is a new enterprise marked by a certain experimental character, a certain ambiguity, uncertainty and tenuousness. It is not yet a finished product; rather, it is a pilgrimage. Living and proclaiming the Gospel according to this paradigm, the Asian Church discovers its identity as a truly Catholic and a truly Asian Church.

## Acknowledgements

Had I not arrived in Thailand in July 1995, I might have completed my doctoral dissertation many years ago. However, if that had happened, I would have never come across the fascinating theme of Asian Catholic theology. So, after all, I have no complaints, but rather joy and satisfaction.

Along my over 20-year journey on Asian highways and roads less traversed, I have been blessed to have inspiring people as my mentors, guides and friends. Among the most important and inspiring is the late Benedictine father Anscar Chupungco, who first invited me to visit the Paul VI Institute of Liturgy in the southern Philippines, of which Fr. Anscar was the director. It was he, together with the late Thai priest, Fr. Paisal Anamwat, who then invited me to attend the FABC-related Asian Liturgy Forum (ALF). Many times since my first participation at ALF in 2005, I have been the sole non-Catholic attendee in the annual meetings of the ALF. The Asian ecumenical friendship and hospitality I received from the ALF friends to a “separated brother” has been impressive. I recall that it was in an ALF meeting where I first heard of the FABC. The principal impetus to study the FABC writings comes from these contacts.

ข้าพเจ้าขอบคุณพี่น้องคริสตชนในประเทศไทย โดยเฉพาะพี่น้องในสภาคริสตจักรลูเธอรันในประเทศไทย  
ขอบคุณสำหรับมิตรภาพ ความอบอุ่น และทุกความร่วมมือ ที่ข้าพเจ้าได้รับจากพี่น้อง  
ตลอดระยะเวลาที่ข้าพเจ้าได้ร่วมรับใช้พระเจ้ากับท่าน  
พี่น้องเหล่านี้ได้สอนให้ข้าพเจ้าได้เข้าใจความหมายของความเป็นคนเอเชีย  
และความหมายของความเป็นคริสตชนไทย  
ข้าพเจ้าหวังเป็นอย่างยิ่งว่า หนังสือเล่มนี้จะสามารถช่วยท่านผู้อ่าน เรื่องวิธีการนำความเชื่อและคำสอนคริสเตียน  
เข้าสู่วัฒนธรรมและบริบทไทย ยิ่งกว่านั้นอีก ข้าพเจ้าหวังว่า ในอนาคต  
ข้าพเจ้าจะมีโอกาสร่วมมือและร่วมรับใช้กับพี่น้องอีก

Academically, I am most indebted to my principal supervisor Professor Miikka Ruokanen who has always been supportive. His advice and critique were invaluable to my study. Docent Jyri Komulainen, an expert in Catholic and Asian theology, has contributed much of his time and expertise in helping me. Dr. Edmund Chia of the Australian Catholic University (Melbourne) has helped greatly in making this book much better than what it would have been, had I not had the benefit of his knowledge of the topic. He has been critical, but always in a gentle manner I have come to associate with my colleagues in Asia.

The skill of my language checker Dr. Grant White in making my “Finglish” into proper English has been impressive. He not only corrected my language, but also made many remarkable observations with regard to my theological argumentation. He has always been ready to help and support me throughout the process.

Special thanks go to my pre-examiners. Professor Stephen Bevans, an expert in the field of contextual theology and the theology of the FABC, was both critical and encouraging in his assessment of my manuscript. He gave me confidence to pursue this project to the end. Thanks also

to him for agreeing to serve as my opponent in the public examination. Docent Juhani Forsberg's knowledge of Catholic and ecumenical theology was helpful.

Dr. Tiina Huhtanen was kind enough to read my manuscript and provided very helpful comments. In addition, a fellow student of mine, Dr. Raimo Kuismanen (who successfully defended his own dissertation a few weeks before me) read my manuscript and gave several insightful thoughts which helped me.

My bishop, Docent Jari Jolkkonen, has followed my project with interest and enthusiasm and encouraged me to persevere until its completion.

A special word of thanks goes to Ms. Angelic Que who kindly assisted me by making copies of several FABC-related doctoral dissertations stored at the Ateneo de Manila University, the Philippines. *Maraming salamat.*

I also wish to thank the Faculty of Theology of the University of Helsinki and its staff for their help with practical questions, especially Ms. Jutta Kajander and Ms. Anniina Sjöblom.

I also wish to acknowledge the financial support for this study provided by the *Tieteen ja taiteen kristillinen tukisäätiö* and the Church Research Institute.

I wish to thank my family for their support. My dear wife and long-time companion Leena has never lost her unwavering trust in me getting this finished. She has also kept me in constant touch with everyday realities. Our already grown-up children have followed their father's work with interest. My late father, who sadly passed away in March 2017, together with my mother, have always given their heartfelt support to their children's studies.

I also wish to mention the comforting and faithful presence of our pet dog Nana during the long hours of writing in solitude.

I dedicate this dissertation to my late father Erkki, an avid theologian in his own right. Today he would be happy and smile.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. The Search for a New Identity - The 1970 Asian Bishops' Meeting as the Beginning of the FABC

*"If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future."*<sup>1</sup>

This is the clarion call issued by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) in 1977. This call arose from the experiences of the past when the Catholic Church in Asia had largely remained a church with a foreign face for the peoples of Asia and consequently had been merely a minority Church<sup>2</sup> amongst the great religions of Asia. This call also arose from the understanding that a new era was dawning. Time had come for the Asian Church to discover who they were and what their mission in Asia was. Already seven years earlier, in the 1970 Asian Bishops' Meeting (ABM) in Manila on the occasion of the Pope Paul VI's pastoral visit, great visions of the future of the Asian Catholic Church were set before the eyes of the gathered bishops.<sup>3</sup>

In the ABM, about 180 gathered bishops from all around Asia discussed the context of Asia as a challenge which they had to face in order to be able to fulfil the mission of the Church in Asia.<sup>4</sup> The bishops viewed Asia as a continent with many severe problems, marked by poverty, health

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<sup>1</sup> Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church 14, FAPA 1, 70

<sup>2</sup> The sources of this study are inconsistent in their use of the terms "church" (with a lower case "c") and "Church" (with a capitalised "C"). However, usually the form "Church" refers to the Catholic Church or to a local/particular Church of the Catholic Church. A lower case "c" denotes the general noun "church". Quotations from sources or other literature retains the spelling of the original text. The present study follows the practice described above.

<sup>3</sup> The message of the meeting and its resolutions are from *For All the Peoples of Asia. Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991. Vol. 1. Editors Gaudencio Rosales, C. G. Arevalo. Quezon City, Claretian Publications. 1997.* The most important FABC documents have been published in five volumes; The first volume includes the documents from 1970-1991, the second the documents from 1992-1996, the third the documents from 1997-2001, the fourth the documents from 2002-2006, and the fifth the documents from 2007-2012 respectively. Hereafter the abbreviations of these sourcebooks will be referred to as FAPA 1, FAPA 2, FAPA 3, FAPA 4, and FAPA 5. The post 2012 documents are found on FABC's website at [http://www.fabc.org/offices/csec/ocsec\\_fabc\\_papers.html](http://www.fabc.org/offices/csec/ocsec_fabc_papers.html). I will return to the character of the documents of the FABC below.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Chia (2003a, 2.1.1.) describes the significance of the Asian Bishops' Meeting (ABM) and its importance for birth of FABC: "The papal visit of Pope Paul VI to Asia in November 1970 then provided the occasion for the bishops of Asia to come together in Manila, the Philippines. A gathering which brought together 180 bishops from all across Asia, the Asian Bishops' Meeting (as the event was called), was also a time when the notion of a Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences was conceived and conceptualized. Citing Yves Congar, Filipino Jesuit priest, C.G. Arevalo, who was present at that meeting, and subsequently served as a peritus to the FABC for many years, suggests that the Asian Bishops' Meeting (ABM) can be regarded as the beginnings of the truly Asian Church: "And now the heirs have found their own voice; they can now speak for themselves... It is now the time of the heirs."

problems, wars and other suffering. Moreover, Asia was seen as a continent of the young; it was also a continent of ancient religions and cultures. After the end of the era of colonialism, Asia was faced with the emergence of a new consciousness and self-understanding. Furthermore, the ABM delegates recognized a new awakening of different groups of people as a contextual reality that the Church had to address if it wanted its message to be relevant to its own peoples.<sup>5</sup>

Having briefly described the largest challenges, the ABM then turned to the Church's response. What would the role of the Church be in this rapidly changing context of Asia? In the document there is a sense of a renewal, an affirmation and commitment to service:

As we affirm this, we ask ourselves how we may more truly be at the service of our peoples.... We know that the first task must be the renewal of ourselves in the light of Christ. We must begin always with a return to the Gospel.... Before Christ and our brothers we commit ourselves with all earnestness to whatever concerns the dignity of man.<sup>6</sup>

The ABM concluded its meeting with resolutions. Among these resolutions the most important point for this study is the pledge to develop an indigenous theology and to do what could be done so that the life and message of the Gospel would be more incarnate in the cultures of Asia so that Asian Christianity might help to promote all that is "authentically human in these cultures."<sup>7</sup> The Pope and bishops saw clearly that the time had ripened for the Church in Asia to become more accessible to the peoples of Asia. In order to materialise these and many other resolutions, the bishops suggested the establishment of a permanent structure, a structure that would later become the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.<sup>8</sup>

When reading these documents written at the dawn of the FABC, one can easily sense a certain enthusiasm and excitement. Something new was about to be born in Asia. Despite the significant challenges, the statements have an optimistic tone. The Catholic Church in Asia was able to realize fully its identity as an Asian Church. The general tone of these expressions, in addition to excitement and enthusiasm, is even haste and an understanding that those renewals hoped for would

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<sup>5</sup> "We witness the awakening of the masses, and the ending of the long ages of resigned fatalism and passive acceptance of poverty, ignorance and sickness, of injustice and exploitation, of mismanagement and corruption among those responsible for the conduct of public affairs. ... We witness above all the awakening of the youth ... Last of all, as a part of this awakening, we see the face of an Asia at long last coming to birth as a true community of peoples." ABM 10, FAPA 1, 4.

<sup>6</sup> ABM 14, 15, 18, FAPA 1, 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> ABM 13, FAPA 1, 9.

<sup>8</sup> "The Episcopal Conferences here represented are urged to authorize and support a permanent structure for the effective implementation of the decisions of this meeting." ABM Resolutions 1, FAPA 1, 8. The organisation and structures of the FABC will be presented in a more detailed fashion below.

initiate a process in the Asian Church. The end result was not yet visible; nevertheless, the bishops saw clearly that in order to fulfil its mission in Asia, the Church needed to respond better to the challenges posed by Asian contexts. In a word, better inculturation and contextualisation were called for. This meant that in all respects the Church needed to become a truly Asian Church.

However, it is important to understand that the Asian “clarion call”, as mentioned in the opening sentence above, was not issued in a vacuum. The FABC’s birth<sup>9</sup> coincides with the rise of contextual theologies in Asia and other continents as well.<sup>10</sup> The emergence of contextual theologies can be understood best as efforts to discover one’s own identity as a church in a particular place and context. Therefore, in order to be able to understand better the theological process of the FABC it is necessary to take a brief look at the emergence of contextual theologies in general, and in Asia in particular.

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<sup>9</sup> Edmund Chia (2003a, 6) describes how difficult the birth of FABC was as a group of Asian bishops gathered in a meeting in Hong Kong in 1971 to discuss the nature, objectives and scope of the proposed Federation as expressed in the resolutions of the ABM : “The bishops, however, encountered their first obstacle when Bishop Edward Cassidy, the then Taipei-based nuncio, informed them that the Roman Curia had expressed reservations about the proposed Federation, and advised against the meeting. In an interview with South Korean Cardinal Stephen Kim, who was among the bishops who attended that ground-breaking meeting in Hong Kong, Thomas Fox [*Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church*, page 24] records the Cardinal as saying: “Cassidy told us that there was nothing that could be done. The only thing left [for us] to do was to go shopping—or leave Hong Kong right away. We were shocked.” Undoubtedly, the fear that the proposed Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences might turn out the way the Conference of Latin American Bishops (Consejo Episcopal Latino-Americano—CELAM, established 1956) turned out, seems at the base of the fear-reactions from Rome. The propositions of the 1968 Medellin conference, which endorsed a fundamental option for the poor, was perhaps still fresh in the minds of the curial bishops. They certainly did not wish to see yet another irruption from the Church’s periphery, especially after the Asian Bishops’ Meeting had more or less also endorsed the fundamental option for the poor. In fact, the curial bishops had actually criticized the ABM statement as “a work more of sociologists than churchmen. With Cassidy’s implicit blessings, the Hong Kong meeting continued anyway, and came up with the proposed structures and draft Statutes, which were eventually approved in November, 1972. Thus, FABC was officially constituted, two years after the ABM. ”

<sup>10</sup> For a concise introduction to the debate around contextualisation see e.g. Ahonen 2003, 28-39. A robust presentation, and a classic in the field, is Stephen Bevans’s *Models of Contextual Theology* (Revised and Expanded Edition, 2002.) Amalados 2014, 104, notes that the birth of the FABC should be classed with the theological development of other denominations. He mentions the following: the establishment of the Association of Theological Schools in South East Asia (1957, the name was changed to Association for Theological Education in South East Asia, ATESEA), which collaborated with the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and launched the Program for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA). PTCA had a project by the name “Doing Theology with Asian Resources” , which led to seminars and publications. The South Asian Theological Resource Institute (SATHRI) was founded in 1989. Lastly, a Protestant Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS) was founded in 1997. The FABC has collaborated with CATS.

## 1.2. Features of the Development of Contextual Theologies

### 1.2.1. Terminology and Discussion of the Necessity and Possibility of Contextual Theologies

The terminology describing the efforts to make the Christian message more “at home” in different cultures and contexts can be confusing.<sup>11</sup> The terms bearing approximately the same meaning include “adaptation”, “incarnation”, “acculturation”, “indigenisation” and “inculturation”. For example, these terms are often used in early FABC documents interchangeably. Another term, “contextualization”, with approximately the same meaning as the above terms, is used more in ecumenical discussion and in Protestant parlance. Anscar J. Chupungco explains the difference between “contextualization” and “inculturation” as follows:

In the 70’s the World Council of Churches adopted the word “contextualization” to signify the process of updating church structures so that they would keep pace with the changes in the modern world. The context in which the Christian community lives should be a chief player in the modernization of church structures. Context includes socio-economic, political, cultural, religious, and geographical factors. In a way, it is more encompassing than inculturation, but unlike inculturation it does not focus specifically on culture. --- the Roman Catholic Church later adopted the word contextualization, but with a distinctly political meaning. It became synonymous with the liberation movement, especially in Latin America and some countries in Asia that were under dictatorial and abusive political leadership. Inculturation, --- was a word that cultural anthropologists preferred, because it expresses the creative and dynamic relationship between two cultures. In 1981 Pope John Paul II said that inculturation, though a neologism, “expresses one of the elements of the great mystery of the incarnation”.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the wide variety and arbitrariness of the terms indicate that the matter discussed here is not easily defined. In many ways contextual/inculturated theologies are new “things”, unexplored terrain. Interestingly, Asian Catholic Bishops are among the first to use the term “inculturation.” This occurred in the ABM resolutions, when the bishops state:

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<sup>11</sup> David J. Bosch in his seminal *Transforming Mission* (1993, 420-457) introduces several of these important concepts from the framework of mission.

<sup>12</sup> Chupungco s.a., pp. 2-3. Bevans (2002, 26-27) discusses the difference between the terms contextualization and indigenization as articulated by the Asian Catholic bishops as early as 1979: “As the Asian bishops pointed out in 1979, *contextualization* both extends and corrects the older terminology. As the Asian Bishops express it, *indigenization* focused on the purely cultural dimension of human experience, while *contextualization* broadens the understanding of culture to include social, political, and economic questions. In this way, culture is understood in more dynamic, flexible ways and is seen to be not closed and self-contained, but more open and able to be enriched with an encounter with other cultures and movements. And while *indigenization* “tended to see both the home culture and the culture ‘out there’ as good,” *contextualization* “tends to be more critical of both cultures.”

In the inculturation of the life and message of the Gospel in Asia, there have been hesitations and mistakes in the past, but we are more than ever convinced that dialogue with our fellow Asians whose commitment to other faiths is increasingly important. We also urge on all a deep respect for the culture and traditions of our peoples, and express the hope that the catholicity of the Church, the root of our diversity in the oneness of faith, may serve to help Asians remain truly Asian, and yet become fully part of the modern world and the one family of mankind.<sup>13</sup>

When studying new and emerging contextual Asian theologies in general, it appears that a common characteristic of them is their self-definition against Western theological structures and patterns. Western theology is assessed to be inadequate for and incompatible with Asian contexts. Even today, in many Asian countries it is generally held that Christianity is a religion of Westerners.<sup>14</sup>

One obvious reason for this is colonialism which laid a heavy Western burden on Christian faith. When this yoke was finally removed, the search for a new Asian identity began. However, it is certainly not correct to interpret the attempts to create Asian theologies merely as opposition to the heritage of colonialism. Rather, the end of the colonial era created more space for searching for ways of creating indigenous contextual theologies. Many Asian theologians genuinely felt that new theological paradigms were needed; the models heretofore were unsuitable for and unsuccessful in presenting the Christian gospel in Asia.<sup>15</sup> A feeling of the foreignness of the Christian faith in Asia was clearly experienced also by the FABC.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> ABM 24, FAPA 1, 6. This is actually the first time the word "inculturation" is used in an official Church document whereas the very first recorded use of the term appears in the year 1962 by Jesuit professor Fr. Joseph Masson. Later, the Society of Jesus started using the word frequently in the years 1974 and 1975. The word inculturation first appears in 1979 in a papal document, the Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* of John Paul II. See Shorter 1999, 10

<sup>14</sup> Chia (2003, 167) notes: "The Christian religion is regarded as foreign much the same way Western persons living in Asia – even if for decades and centuries – are perceived as foreign. The Malay language even labels Christianity as *agama orang putih*, which literally means "the white man's religion." I myself have witnessed this attitude several times when I worked in Thailand.

<sup>15</sup> Some of these theologians will be introduced below.

<sup>16</sup> This is a repeatedly appearing comment in FABC's documents; see e.g. BIRA IV/2 3, FAPA 1, 251-252. This challenge is noted also in the connection of inculturation which is argued to be an indispensable necessity for the Church's mission. Consultation on "Evangelization and Inculturation" FAPA 3, 217.

Interestingly, Aloysius Pieris (1996, 65-67) does not fully agree with this analysis. He argues that there are two types of religiosity: the cosmic and metacosmic. The cosmic embraces all tribal and clanic cultures whose religiosity consists of revering nature and its forces that are so much a part of the world as to be encountered in the context of an ecological spirituality. (This is usually called animism.) The metacosmic refers to so-called great religions (e.g. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity), which suggest the existence of an immanently transcendental horizon either through liberating knowledge (*gnosis*) or redemptive love (*agape*). Pieris further asserts that the metacosmic religions are like helicopters, while the cosmic religions serve as them as landing pads; a metacosmic religion finds its natural point of insertion in a cosmic religion. According to Pieris, where a helicopter (a metacosmic religion) has already landed, another cannot land on the same pad. Mass conversions from one metacosmic religion to the other are thus improbable. Pieris's prognosis is, then, that the cultures that have absorbed the great religions have no room for Christ, except perhaps as one cosmic power among many others.

But what indeed was a novelty in this development was that only now contextual theologies gradually started becoming a part of global theologies. The time of a single, universally standard and everywhere applicable theology was over.<sup>17</sup> It appeared clearly that the *pluriformity* of theologies is a fact.<sup>18</sup> Any theology is ineluctably contextually bound and conditioned. This also makes it possible for local theological answers and solutions to become interesting sources for churches in totally different contexts as well.

The Roman Catholic Stephen B. Bevans explains the matter as follows:

Theology today ... must be a contextual theology. Several important movements and currents of our times point out aspects in Christianity that make imperative a theology that takes seriously human experience, social location, particular cultures, and social change in those cultures.<sup>19</sup>

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Aloysius Pieris, S.J., (1934-) is a Sri Lankan liberation theologian and scholar. He has attempted to respond to the challenges of the spirituality and philosophy of Buddhism and socio-political contexts of his own country. He has also been actively involved in interreligious dialogue. Pieris is also the founder-director of Tulana Research Centre for Encounter and Dialogue in Kelaniya, Sri Lanka (<http://tulana-researchcentre.blogspot.fi/2007/08/tulana-research-centre-for-encounter.html>). Pieris's major books are *Asian Theology of Liberation* (1988), *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (1989) and *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (1996).

<sup>17</sup> The number of publications on Asian Christian theologies abound; good introductions to various important themes and authors are e.g. *Christianities in Asia* (ed. by Peter C. Phan), *Christian Theology in Asia* (ed. by Sebastian C. H. Kim) and recent and quite extensive *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia* (2014, edited by Felix Wilfred).

<sup>18</sup> Acknowledging the pluriformity, or diversity, of theologies of course also implies the question about theology of religions. Especially in Asian contexts, where the mutual existence of religions is a matter of fact, the emergence of new contextual theologies inescapably raises the question of the possible salvific character of these religions. In the contemporary theological discussion this particular issue is hotly debated. Normally, theologies of religion are categorized as exclusivistic, inclusivistic, or pluralistic. Komulainen (2003) enlightens this debate in a detailed way. He reports that, according to some critics of pluralism (e.g. S. Mark Heim), pluralism itself does not succeed in attaining what it pursues. Rather, it will result in an inner conflict when it tries to present itself as the normative way of understanding plurality, rather than accepting the existence of a genuine diversity of theological opinions. Komulainen 2003, 10. Moreover, Komulainen (2003, 13) asserts: "Heim (1995, 101-103, 109) proves that pluralists are eventually inclusivists when they try to adapt religions into the frame of reference of the modern Western worldview." According to this line of thought, various religious traditions can only be pronounced valid when they are placed in the context of Western understanding of epistemology, and measured against modern concepts of equality and justice. Komulainen (2003, 18) concludes that many promoters of religious pluralism, such as John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Paul Knitter are all in their own way committed to the tradition of Enlightenment.

<sup>19</sup> Bevans 2002, 15. The book referred to here is *Models of Contextual Theology*, which Bevans first published in 1992. I have used the 10th edition, which is a revised and expanded edition of the first edition. In the first edition, Bevans introduces five models of contextual theology. These are 1) The translation model, 2) The anthropological model, 3) The praxis model, 4) The synthetic model, and 5) The transcendental model.

Ahonen 2003, 34-35, summarizes these five models as follows: "(1) The translation model places the emphasis on the gospel message and the preservation of the church tradition, (2) the praxis model gives priority to social change, and (3) the anthropological model lays the stress on cultural identity. As far as (4) the synthetic model is concerned there is an attempt to keep each of the four elements in balance and to synthesize their insights into a skilful, "even artistic" blend. In (5) the transcendental model, in turn, the focus is not on the content to be articulated but on the subject who is articulating."

Subsequently Bevans has added a sixth model to the latest editions of his book. This is the countercultural model, which Bevans describes as follows: "What this model realizes more than any other model is how some contexts are

Bevans further describes contextual theology as a dialogue between the experiences of the past and the experience of the present. Both of these are normative, and theology is done by allowing our experience today be measured, judged, interpreted, and critiqued by the wisdom found in the classical sources of the Christian tradition, and by allowing these sources to be measured and critiqued by the happenstances in our lives, by our cultural values, struggles and social changes that shape our world.<sup>20</sup>

Mutual dialogue, perhaps even dialogue between equals (i.e., the Christian sources and the context) thus becomes an indispensable method of doing theology contextually. This approach to doing theology of course brings to the fore the question of interpretation, or hermeneutics. As “experiences of the present”, contexts differ from place to place, also created theologies are inevitably different and dependent on the results of interpretation of the Christian sources in each particular context. Thus, one can ask what can still hold the Church together in the midst of its particularities? Can we still constitute a “metatheology”, an unchangeable and universal core above and beyond contextual expressions? The Evangelical missiologist Paul G. Hiebert sees finding an universal core as possible. He states that there is a need to construct a metatheology or supracultural theology as a step beyond contextualisation. He maintains that there is an unchanging nature to the Christian gospel: there is the unchanging nature of it: those absolutes that transcend time and cultural pluralism. In this approach the Scripture is the primary standard against which our theologies must be tested. Another principle is humility and the willingness to be led by the Spirit in the reading of Scripture. The final principle is that the hermeneutical community interprets and

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simply antithetical to the gospel and need to be challenged by the gospel’s liberating and healing power [...] Since the dynamic of this model is...to truly *encounter* and *engage* the context through respectful yet critical analysis and authentic gospel proclamation in word and deed, we might speak of this model as one of *encounter* or *engagement*. The fact the model is committed to a prophetic “telling forth” of the truth in the context of and sometimes over against a “culture of death” might point to a term such as the *prophetic model*....A first presupposition of the countercultural model is the radical ambiguity and insufficiency of human context.” Bevans 2002, 118-120. (italics in original). Interestingly, Bevans observes that this model originates from the realization of how Christianity in the West now lives in a context which is very un-Christian and where Christianity has been marginalized as a private matter. Bevans 2002, 122.

I view Bevans’ comments on the countercultural character of the Christian message as an important observation regarding the question of the relationship between the Christian message and cultures. When reading contextual (Catholic) theologies in the so called Third World, their analysis of their respective cultures is generally quite positive. Criticism is often directed toward western influences, while native cultural traditions are treasured.

<sup>20</sup> Bevans 2002, 166.

seeks consensus. In Hiebert's opinion, this metatheological process can lead to a growing consensus on theological absolutes and thus help in developing a truly supracultural theology.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, this short description of Hiebert's position shows that he appears to represent a variety of the "kernel and husk" –model in which an unchanging, noncontingent core of the Christian message can be identified.

The Roman Catholic theologian Stephen Bevans approaches the challenge of constructing a metatheology from a somewhat different angle as he seems to support a possibility of finding a unity in diversity:

Rather than a bland uniformity, Christianity is endowed with a dynamic that moves toward unity through a rich diversity, through conversation and even argument among people of particular personal, cultural, and historical experience. Only if every group in the church ...is included in its particularity will the church be able to be truly *the church*. Only as the church enters into serious dialogue with every culture can it be a witness to the "Pleroma" that is Jesus Christ.<sup>22</sup>

Bevans's comment pays attention to the unity of the church. The rich diversity and particularity of Christianity are a means through which unity can be realised. In addition, particularity and diversity do not destroy the oneness of the church, which of course is one of the classical marks of the church.

The emergence of contextual theologies occurred concomitantly with the rise of postmodernism and globalization.<sup>23</sup> Although as a phenomenon postmodernism was born in the Western world, its emphasis on pluriformity of interpretations, particularities instead of metanarratives and local communities instead of universally accepted truths (e.g., the assertion that a centre can be anywhere!) finds fruitful soil in the non-Western contextual theologies. Generally, in those

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<sup>21</sup> Hiebert 1994, 93-103.

<sup>22</sup> Bevans 2002, 14-15. (Emphasis in original). "Unity in diversity" is a popular expression in e.g. the ecumenical movement. In the context of the discussion of religious pluralism, Rudolf C. Heredia (2014, 264) promotes not unity over and above the diversity but rather diversity in quest for unity, i.e., diversity-in-unity.

<sup>23</sup> Phan 2004, 217-218: "... [P]ostmodern epistemology is built on two basic assumptions: it views all explanations of reality as constructions that are useful but not objectively true and denies that we have the ability to step outside our constructions of reality. With this constructivist rather than objectivist outlook, postmodernism rejects the correspondence theory of truth and adopts a pluralistic view of knowledge. ...The age of the grand narrative is over; what is left are local narratives that one constructs in one's particular community."



theologies the approach to doing theology is inductive rather than deductive.<sup>24</sup> This means that context, or contextual realities, becomes an important source for theological reflection. This very question is crucial for the whole process of contextualisation or inculturation. How to balance between the universal and the local aspects of faith? To what extent should, or can, the context dictate conditions of inculturation? Will there be anymore a universally accepted gospel or interpretation of it?<sup>25</sup>

Peter C. Phan also writes of the ways in which the process of globalization challenges local cultures. He describes globalization as extension, whereby the ideals of modernity and technological reason are extended throughout the world with the help of neoliberal capitalism and new communication technologies. Globalization is also described as compression in which the dividing line between past and future has become blurred. Moreover, globalization attempts to create a “hyperculture” based on consumption and entertainment. However, Phan does not see the position of local cultures as hopeless. In their struggle for survival and integrity, religions have quite often played a key role in alliance with local cultures.<sup>26</sup> It seems, then, that in Phan’s opinion

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<sup>24</sup> One classic example of these approaches is the model of the Taiwanese C. S. Song’s *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (1986). Song’s primary method is to construct an Asian theology with primarily Asian resources. More theologians with a similar approach will be introduced below.

<sup>25</sup> Phan (2004, 222-232) discusses the challenges of inculturation in the context of liturgical inculturation in the Roman Catholic Church. “If the gospel, and more specifically, the liturgy, must be regarded as a cultural, symbolic “world”, a social construct with its own interests and idiosyncracies, then inculturation is not an “incarnation” of a timeless, unchanging, and acultural reality (such as the eternal Logos) into a particular culture, but and intercultural encounter or dialogue between at least two cultures. ... Second ... the issue of power is of paramount importance. It concerns, first of all, the relation between Roman authorities and the local churches.” Phan 2004, 222-223.

Siu (2000 ) describes how a socio-political form of postmodernism has had an impact in Asia. A dramatic shift has occurred from labor-intensive agriculture and manufacturing to state-of-the-art technology in manufacturing and services. These rapid economic changes undermine the societal values and traditional-personal virtues which have given Asian countries stability and self-identity. Asian countries are now experiencing the dark side of postmodernity. In the area of theology Siu cautions against overlooking the content of biblical doctrines. He disagrees e.g. with C.S. Song’s *Third-Eye Theology* and Kosuke Koyama’s *Water Buffalo Theology*, which, according to Siu, put too much weight on issues like the relation of theology and culture, theory and praxis, social change and religious faiths, at the expense of God’s revelation and the core of the gospel message. Siu 2000.

(<http://www.kneillfoster.com/aar/2000/AAR2000-5Post.php>. (Accessed October 15, 2015). An interesting detail is that Koyama’s *Water Buffalo Theology*, when translated in Thai language, also the very title changes into “Farmer’s or Countryman’s Theology”, ศาสนาศาสตร์ลูกทุ่ง. “Water buffalo” in Thai (ควาย) would probably sound too offensive as one connotation of the word is “fool”.

<sup>26</sup> Phan 2004, 221-222. With regard to Asian Catholic theologians, it is also interesting to read the comments of Felix Wilfred on possible positive role of religions, especially when facing globalization. He criticizes globalization as follows: “It [globalization] suits the general agenda of the vested interests that the world at all levels be administered by those who have knowledge and power. What it does to people is to make them simply objects divesting them of their subjecthood and agency.” Wilfred 2003, 6. According to Wilfred (2003, 7), from an Asian perspective, pluralism is a desirable and very “Asian” matter: “Plurality has been the hallmark of Asian life, and without it Asia loses all its hope for its future. On the contrary, the forms and modes globalization creates are homogenous in character. This is observable in the striking common patterns of production, distribution (marketing) and consumption of goods and

a genuine Christian faith should not attempt to create an acultural or supracultural structure above the local and particular, and that efforts to create a “metatheology” will probably not be successful. In his view the catholicity of the Church is manifested in diversity and particularity.

The discussion regarding concepts such as “local,” “particular,” “universal,” and “global” naturally concerns the church and its theology as well. What is the relationship between the church’s locality and its universality? On the one hand, what is a local, particular church, and, on the other hand, in what does the universal church consist? We will now turn our attention to this specific question, especially how these concepts appear in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and how they can be understood and interpreted.

### **1.2.2. The Church- Universal and Local and their Relationship**

What is generally meant by the terms “universal Church” and “local Church”? More specifically, what is the relationship of a local Church to the universal Church in the Vatican II theology? Answers to these questions will be helpful for this study as the FABC has validly been described as “Asia’s continuing Vatican II”<sup>27</sup>. For the following clarification of the usage of the terms “local/particular” and “universal” the discussion of Joseph Komonchak is helpful.<sup>28</sup>

First, Komonchak comments that Vatican II was not consistent in its use of the terms “local” and “particular” Church. “Particular Church” appears more often, and normally refers to a diocese. “Local Church” is used for dioceses and also for patriarchal Churches. Secondly, Komonchak explains that the Revised Code of Canon Law always uses the term “particular Church” to refer a diocese, but the term “local Church” does not appear at all in the Revised Code.<sup>29</sup> Finally, after

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services all over the world.” Wilfred (2003, 8) further advocates pluralism when he asserts: “The difference which the various identities and suppressed groups represent is something willed by God who also willed the bio-diversity in our world. Therefore, no religion could subscribe to a vision of reality that tends to abolish differences under the pretext of a pseudo-unity.” Pluralism is therefore the will of God, to which nature also testifies. It also seems that for Wilfred no meta-level of religion exists behind or above the existing religions. It appears that on this point Wilfred differs from theological positions of religious pluralists discussed above in note 14.

Felix Wilfred is an Indian theologian who has served as a theological consultant to FABC for many years. He is one of the most prominent contemporary Asian Catholic theologians.

<sup>27</sup> Kroeger 2008 b, Introduction.

<sup>28</sup> Komonchak, *Towards a Theology of the Local Church*. FABC Papers No. 42 (1986)

<sup>29</sup> Komonchak 1986, 15.

discussing this important ecclesiological question at considerable length, Komonchak finds the question of the relationship between the universality and locality of the church to be quite difficult: “[T]he difficult task of reconciling particularity and universality, locality and catholicity, or rather, of achieving a Catholic Church in a local society or culture, involves tensions which it will always be tempting to avoid by choosing one without the other.”<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, Komonchak contends that there is “a temptation to speak of the universal Church as if it is a reality independent of the local Churches, standing over and against them as an entity in its own right.”<sup>31</sup> Sometimes this thinking identifies the universal Church with the Church of Rome, which actually is also a local Church. This way of thinking may lead to an understanding in which the centre is identified as Rome and local Churches as the “periphery”. This understanding implies that the Church of Rome is the universal Church whilst all other Churches are merely local. The primacy of the local Church can be argued in such a way that the universal Church exists in a certain fashion before the local Churches come into existence (that, however, would be a kind of Platonism.) Komonchak concludes that the Church universal “is in and out of the local Churches”. Hence, both the existence of the local Church and the universal Church are not guaranteed in advance but only appear as dimensions when a Church ‘comes to be’.<sup>32</sup>

The debate between the then- Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Cardinal Walter Kasper indicates the importance of the questions of the priority of the local versus the universal dimension of the Church for contemporary Catholic theology. Kilian McDonnell skilfully discusses the 1999-2001 debate<sup>33</sup>. He shows that Ratzinger emphasised the Church’s pre-existence and the ontological priority of the Church. Thus the universality of the Church is prioritised over the local character of church. Kasper contends that pre-existence of the Church concerns the whole Church, not merely the universal

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<sup>30</sup> Komonchak 1986, 35. Komonchak discusses further the question about the universality and the locality as follows: “The Church becomes concretely catholic by becoming particular. ... The Council’s teaching is finely balanced: the Church is not catholic if it is not particular, that is local; but the particular of local is not the Church unless it is catholic at every level, that is, redemptively integrated.” Komonchak 1999, 5. See also Rush 2015, 117-130.

<sup>31</sup> Komonchak 1986, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Komonchak 1986, 34-35. Komonchak concludes his analysis by arguing that the catholicity of the Church determines the genesis of the local Church. This is based on the universal mission that Christ gave to his disciples, the Church. This Pentecost-experience has paradigmatic value for the Churches of all times; it is based on the Church’s belief that Christ’s word and grace have universal anthropological value and relevance. The first Christian community which gathered in Jerusalem was both local and universal. “That there is in Christ neither Jew nor Greek ... must set the terms also of its relations with every other local Church.” This dimension, in Komonchak’s analysis, seems to place the emphasis on the priority of the universal and catholic character of the church to its particular and local character. This is, “there is not Church which does not gather around a Gospel of universal significance and which is not in communion with the other Churches.” Komonchak 1986, 34-35.

<sup>33</sup> McDonnell 2002, 227-250

aspect of the Church. Moreover, Kasper stresses the simultaneity of the universal Church and local churches that stand in a perichoretic, reciprocal relationship with one another. McDonnell summarises the largest difference of the debate between the two Cardinals: “Kasper’s fear is that Ratzinger’s universal Church is a logical construct, an abstraction, existing apart from the historical reality. Ratzinger’s fear is that Kasper’s emphasis on the empirical church reduces ecclesiology to sociology.”<sup>34</sup>

Even this short, summary review of the discussion about and challenges regarding the meaning of the terms “local” and “universal” and their mutual relationship indicates the possible complexity of the matter. In the Roman Catholic Church, this very question directly concerns e.g., the authority and power: i.e., what is the relationship between Rome and dioceses in various countries? Is the Roman Catholic Church a “monolithic pyramid” in which bishops act as “branch secretaries” representing the universal head office of Rome, or is the Church rather a communion of local, particular Churches? These and many other similar questions concern important matters that the present study will need to address in the context of the texts produced by the FABC.

With good reason the FABC can be said to be the most important representative of the contemporary Asian Catholic theology.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, it is not the sole representative. When studying Asian Catholic theology, one cannot forget the general theological development which has already taken place for many decades. As stated above, the birth of the FABC could not have happened without the impetus of Vatican II, but much had already been done even before the Council.<sup>36</sup> There were theologians who had realised that the Church in Asia must mature and become more localised in order to be able to speak to its own peoples.<sup>37</sup> Therefore it is necessary to turn our attention now to some of these pioneering theologians.

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<sup>34</sup> McDonnell 2002, 247.

<sup>35</sup> “[T]he FABC’S Plenary Assemblies are the supreme representative body for the Church in Asia. No other body can rightly claim to represent the Asian Church more than does the Plenary Assembly.” Chia 2003, 24.

<sup>36</sup> Moffet (2005) in his excellent *A History of Christianity in Asia* (vol. 2) writes about mission enterprises to Asia since the 16th century. Especially the efforts made by the Jesuits with regard to indigenisation have generally been credited as genuine attempts to make the Christian message accessible to local people and cultures. See Moffet 2005, 3-142. Varayilan (2008, 93) posits that during the era of the early Jesuit missionaries the goal of their activities was the extension of the church. Francis Xavier is mentioned as one who did not have high regard for indigenous peoples, whereas two other Jesuits, Matteo Ricci in China and Robert de Nobili in India viewed local cultures positively. Kavunkal (2008, 27) describes de Nobili: “[H]e evolved a Christian theological vocabulary and thus laid the foundation for today’s inculturation.” Later indigenisation attempts of the Jesuits in China led to the infamous Chinese Rites controversy. See e.g. Moffet 2005, 120-142

<sup>37</sup> Before the emergence of the terms contextualisation, indigenisation, inculturation, and the like, there were genuine attempts to create Indian Christian theologies. In this regards, one of the most notable theologians is *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay* (1861-1907) who attempted to fashion a Hindu-Catholic faith based on Advaitic philosophical theology and

### 1.3. A Few Pioneering Asian Catholic Contextual Theologians

The following section will introduce some remarkable Catholic theologians who have contributed to the development of an Asian theology:<sup>38</sup> The Indian *Sebastian Kappen*<sup>39</sup> and Sri Lankan *Aloysius Pieris*<sup>40</sup> are two prominent Jesuits. They have contributed to the areas of interreligious dialogue and social implications of the Christian message. Pieris has been critical of the contemporary Roman Catholic notion of inculturation. In his opinion, the term itself “presupposes a concept of universal theology that exists by itself in a noninculturated form waiting to be particularized in a given context.”<sup>41</sup> In his opinion, the whole debate on inculturation is based on the erroneous presupposition that churches in Asia (or elsewhere) are not inculturated. Pieris asserts that every

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an idealised understanding of the caste system. He argued that it was possible to be a Catholic by faith and a Hindu by culture. See Kavunkal 2008, 28. Komulainen (2011, 55-56) contends that Upadhyay’s theological framework was neo-Thomistic: “[H]e interpreted Hinduism as a natural level upon which a supernatural faith could be built.” However, Komulainen argues that Upadhyay’s understanding of Hinduism is quite simplistic and upper-caste. Moreover, his neo-Thomistic theological position can be said to be at odds with his intention of building a genuinely Indian theology. Therefore, the enthusiasm for efforts in creating local theologies was not a novelty when it appeared in the 1970s. In addition, Protestant missions had for a long time before this new era made efforts in contextualizing the Gospel. See e.g., *Asian Christian Theologies. A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources* (3 vols.) which covers a good number of theologians and theologies operative in Asia since the 7th century. Volume 1 examines the geographical area of South Asia and Australasia, volume 2 covers Southeast Asia, and volume 3 introduces Northeast Asia. These volumes reveal in an interesting way many yet unknown theologians and efforts they made towards the creation of local, contextualized Churches and theologies.

One experience from the Protestant side of an ongoing pursuit in contextualising the Christian faith and from a particular context is John R. Davis’s *Poles Apart?* (1993). It is written from the Thai context, and I personally read it with great interest as a newly-arrived missionary to Thailand in 1995. The title of the book is revealing; the author argues that the Western worldview and the Thai Buddhist worldview represent two different and in many ways mutually incompatible poles.

<sup>38</sup> In addition to Catholic theologians, there are many prolific Asian Protestant contextual theologians. Among them one of the most remarkable is the Taiwanese Reformed theologian Choan Seng Song (1929-). He has committed himself to creating a genuine Asian theology whose God is comprehensible to Asian people in the Asian context. According to Song, the Western God is distant from Asian people. Christianity in its Western form is shaped by Western philosophy and culture. Song is also critical of the influence of Western industrialisation and modernization which, imported by Western colonialism, have brought a Western value system into Asia. According to Song, this has created an identity crisis for Asian Christians. Song attempts to create a theology from “the womb” of Asia. Song’s major books include *Christian Mission in Reconstruction: an Asian Analysis*, (1975); *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings*, (1979); *The Compassionate God: An Exercise in the Theology of Transposition*, (1982); *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, (1986); *Jesus the Crucified People*, (1990); *Jesus and the Reign of God*, (1993); *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, (1994). A few other notable Asian Protestant theologians include Kosuke Koyama (Japan), Kwok Pui-lan (Hong Kong), R.S. Sugirtharajah (Sri Lanka), S. Wesley Ariyaratne (Sri Lanka), Choong Chee Pang (Hong Kong), Sathianathan Clarke (India), Hwa Yung (Malaysia), Namsoon Kang (Korea), Sebastian C.H. and Kirsteen Kim (Korea), Archie C. C. Lee (Hong Kong), M. Thomas Thangaraj (India), and John A. Titaley (Indonesia). The contributions of some of these theologians will be addressed later in the present study.

<sup>39</sup> Sebastian Kappen (1924-1993) wrote more than ten monographs on a variety of topics. The main emphasis of his work was on transformative social action in India and on the liberative and humanizing potential of the original teachings of the historical Jesus as well as of Indian religious traditions, particularly the tradition of dissent represented by the Buddha and the medieval Bhakti Movement. <http://kappen.weebly.com/index.html> (accessed May 4, 2016)

<sup>40</sup> See more on Pieris in the note 16, pp. 13-14.

<sup>41</sup> Pieris 1996, 138.

local church as made up of a group of people is essentially already an inculturated church.<sup>42</sup> There is no culture-free church, but the question remains: whose culture does the church reflect?<sup>43</sup>

Another Indian Jesuit, *George Soares-Prabhu*,<sup>44</sup> has explored the meaning of Jesus in the Indian context. Another is *Michael Amaladoss*,<sup>45</sup> as well as *Duraiswami Simon Amalorpavadass*,<sup>46</sup> who played a vital role in the renewal of the life and mission of the Roman Catholic Church in India, particularly after Vatican II. Another significant figure is the Indian-Catalan theologian *Raimon Panikkar* who, according to many scholars, had a significant role in the development of the theology of religions of Vatican II.<sup>47</sup> In addition, a few notable Filipino theologians are worth mentioning here: first and foremost, the Jesuit Catalino G. Arévalo, a significant theologian for the development of the FABC, to whom the FABC in its ninth Plenary Assembly in 2009 presented a plaque of appreciation for his “pivotal and perduring contributions to assist Asian bishops, specifically: in serving as *peritus* to the FABC from its beginnings in 1970 until 1995, in crafting the visionary and programmatic final document of the First FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974, *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia*, in convening and founding the FABC Theological Advisory

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<sup>42</sup> Pieris 1988, 40.

<sup>43</sup> Phan (2003) 44, prefers the term interculturalization rather than inculturation: “...the way now is open for what has been called the “contextualization model” (I prefer *interculturalization*), which is the process whereby the gospel message encounters a particular culture, calling forth faith and leading to the formation of a faith community, which is culturally authentic and authentically Christian. Here, control of the process resides within the context rather than with an external agent or agency.” (emphasis in the original)

More recently, the International Theological Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) has envisioned a theology of the future which they describe as pluralistic, pluri-confessional, inter-religious/multi-religious, or trans-religious theology. This vision is also called a planetary theology to indicate that theology is not only for the human world but also for the cosmos: Gaia. The EATWOT Commission has published a book on this topic by the title *Along the many paths to God, vol. V, Toward a Planetary Theology*, José María VIGIL (editor) (DUNAMIS PUBLISHERS, 2010, Montreal). A digital version can be accessed and downloaded for free at <http://dunamispublishers.blogspot.com>. Among the contributors to the book are several Asian theologians: Michael Amaladoss, Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, Raimon Panikkar, Peter C. Phan and Aloysius Pieris.

<sup>44</sup> George Soares-Prabhu, S.J. (1929-1995) was an Indian biblical scholar. His most renowned book is a collection of his essays under the title *The Dharma of Jesus* (published posthumously in 2003).

<sup>45</sup> Michael Amaladoss, S.J., (1936-) has published more than 20 books and over 300 articles. It is interesting to note that a great number of the most prominent Asian (Catholic) theologians have been Indian Jesuits. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the arrival of Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci, Nóbort de Nobili and Alexandre de Rhodes (among others) into various Asian countries, Jesuits have generally represented an accepting and accommodating approach toward other religions and cultures.

<sup>46</sup> Bevans (2005, 5), in a paper presented to celebrate 30 years of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, writes that Amalorpavadass (1932 – 1990) was one of the two special secretaries for the Synod of Bishops for 1974 convened by Pope Paul VI which took up the theme “Evangelization in the Modern World”. The synod proposed an interpretation that took into account many of the important movements in Asia and other parts of the Third World. Amalorpavadass’ ideas revolved around a greater role for the local church and the emergence of the theology of liberation.

<sup>47</sup> E.g., Komulainen (2003, 7, n. 28) asserts that Panikkar’s book *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* and some other earlier writings influenced the Council’s decisions regarding other religions. Panikkar (1918-2010) was not an official *peritus* of the Council, but it is very likely that he served as a non-official specialist to the Council.

Commission in 1985, [and]in promoting indigenous Asian theology, for which he is properly recognized as the “Father of Asian Theology”.<sup>48</sup> The two other remarkable Filipino theologians are the lay theologian José M. de Mesa<sup>49</sup> and the Benedictine Anscar J. Chupungco, “a father of all Filipino liturgists.”<sup>50</sup>

It is noteworthy that several of the abovementioned theologians have served as theological consultants to the FABC.<sup>51</sup> They submitted documents for various FABC meetings and workshops. It is therefore safe to surmise that their opinions and insights had an effect on the theology of the FABC as represented in its official documents.<sup>52</sup> However, all of the FABC documents have been published in the name of the FABC as a whole. No individual names of authors of the documents of various meetings and offices are provided. It is therefore not possible to detect with certainty the influence and opinions of the various consultants behind the documents. However, in the present study the various Asian theologians will occasionally be referred to and consulted as being representatives of Asian theological thinking. This approach is intended to show that the FABC’s theological development is part and parcel of Asian Catholic theology in general.

The foregoing discussion has introduced specific important lines of development of contextual Asian theologies. This discussion will serve as background for the next subchapter, which will discuss the task, method and sources of the present study. In addition, the following section will address the most significant previous research on the theology of the FABC.

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<sup>48</sup> [http://www.fabc.org/inside\\_fabc\\_archive\\_2009.html#46](http://www.fabc.org/inside_fabc_archive_2009.html#46) (Accessed September 19, 2017)

<sup>49</sup> De Mesa is retired professor is a professor of Applied Systematic Theology and a University Fellow at De La Salle University, Manila, the Philippines.

<sup>50</sup> Chupungco (1939-2013) was “a Benedictine monk, a liturgist, theologian and a father to all Filipino liturgists... As a leading expert in liturgy, his expertise is sought in all parts of the world. He also produced the Handbook for Liturgical Studies, which is the standard set of textbooks for liturgical education in the world.” Legaspi 2013,

<http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/metro/289458/former-san-beda-rector-dies-from-heart-attack/story/>

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Chia 2003, 158, n24, who enlists the following renowned theologians as resource persons and consultants to the FABC: Tissa Balasuriya, Aloysius Pieris, Jacques Dupuis, Michael Amaladoss, Samuel Rayan, D.S. Amalorpavadass, S. Arokiasamy and Luis Antonio Tagle.

<sup>52</sup> Chia 2003, 157, n24 comments that the opinions of the abovementioned theologians were not always been unquestioningly adopted by the FABC bishops. Lively debates often ensued.

#### 1.4. Task of This Study and its Method and Sources

As discussed above, the intention to make the Asian Catholic Church more accessible to its peoples and more relevant in order to be able to make a meaningful contribution to its own local contexts have been on the agenda of the FABC since its inception. The Asian Church had come of age, and the time was ripe to make the Church more accessible to Asian peoples. The best viable way to achieve this aim was indigenisation; incarnation of the Church. What needed to be done in order to achieve this aim? Was there something in need of change in Church's teaching, theology, or structures? The bishops were painfully aware that almost everywhere the Church in Asia was a tiny minority among masses of people of other faiths.<sup>53</sup>

Inevitably, as the Asian bishops established the FABC, one of the major challenges they faced was becoming "truly Asian" while remaining "truly Catholic". What kind of Asian Catholic contextual theology was being developed in the course of the life of the FABC in order for the Church to become truly Asian in all things?

Thus, based on the abovementioned challenge of, we can articulate the task of the present study as follows: the task of this dissertation is to find out how the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) address the principal task they set themselves from the beginning of the Federation: how do they manage to become "truly Asian" while remaining "truly Catholic"? What kind of Asian contextual theology evolves from this challenge? In other words, how are the Asian bishops able to maintain the universal and local dimensions of the Asian churches?

The FABC documents are undeniably diverse. In the present study, I propose the following approach to the sources: The perspective and structure of the present study will develop like the journey in the course of which the Asian bishops seek the most viable and best ways of being a

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<sup>53</sup> Despite the increase of the number of Christians in some Asian countries, Christians are still a minority of all Asian countries with the exception of the Philippines and East Timor. The number of Christians, however, is very unevenly represented in Asian countries: two countries with the largest number of Christians, the Philippines and China, make up about 40% of the Christian population of Asia, see <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/> (accessed May 4, 2016). In total, the number of Christians in the so called global south is on the rise, whereas the number of Christians in the formerly Christian west is declining. Philip Jenkins has examined the emergence of the global Christianity in many his books, see e.g. his *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity* (2007). The FABC acknowledge their minority status by calling the Asian Catholic Church "a little flock", see, e.g., FABC 5, 4.6., FAPA 1, 282. On mapping Asian Christianity in the context of world Christianity, see Thompson 2008, 3-21.



truly Asian and truly Catholic Church and of being committed to their mission. Indeed, on many occasions the documents themselves describe the Asian Church a Pilgrim Church.<sup>54</sup> From the beginning of the FABC, the Asian bishops clearly understood that this purpose would send the Asian Church into a process. This process of the FABC is visible also in the structure of the present study, which unfolds in the following way.

The first issue to be addressed is “Asianness”, the goal articulated on many occasions by the Asian bishops: i.e., “becoming Asian”. Indeed, as the sources will show, the FABC always begins its theological work with a context analysis. What does the FABC mean by an undeniably broad notion of “Asianness”?<sup>55</sup> To what extent can a contextual theology be characterised with such a broad expression, a term which can also sound somewhat an essentialist and perhaps even controversial? At that point the discussion will be linked to significant components of Asianness as identified by the FABC. Of these components of the Asian worldview above all others the FABC counts harmony and an organic and complementary worldview. I suggest that these factors constitute an important contextual background and landscape in which the Asian Catholic Church was intended to become more deeply rooted so as to diminish the prevailing foreignness of the Church. How does this vast continent, the cradle of all world religions and where the majority of the world’s population live, affect theological answers and solutions undertaken by the Asian bishops?

After having mapped the Asian terrain and having discerned from the sources a “roadmap” for a more Asian Church, the discussion will then move to a relevant and hopefully revealing test case for examining what kind of local and universal theology and church the Asian bishops envisaged. That is, we will discuss the question about truth. Philosophies and religions make truth claims, so does the church. Does “Asia” contribute something particular to the search for and understanding of truth? Therefore, it will be worth examining whether the truth claims given by the Roman magisterium are convergent with Asian apprehensions of truth. To what extent does Tradition (primarily Scripture and Tradition) as *depositum fidei* contain immutable truths that are universally

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<sup>54</sup> E.g. “[A] pilgrim Church on the way to the Kingdom.” OE, Conclusions of the Theological Consultation, FAPA 2, 199 The Church ... [i]n the course of her pilgrim journey through history.” ASIIPA 4<sup>th</sup> General Assembly 2.1., FAPA 4, 180.

<sup>55</sup> Mendoza 2008, 10 n28, makes a few pointed observations and questions about this “Asianness”. The efforts towards “being Asian” and “Asianness” can be seen as attempts to decolonize theology by challenging Western constructions of theology and to reformulate theologies free from serving as tools of colonial masters. In Mendoza’s opinion, Asian theologians need to exercise self-criticism about their dependency on an identity which is the result of a category of difference designed by the West (!). For a short introduction to decolonisation of theology, see Rayan 1988. The question of “Asianness” will be discussed in a more detailed way in chapter 2.

valid and which somehow transcend contextual expressions and interpretations? What is the possible influence of Asian contexts for the understanding of Tradition?

From these central questions the discussion will move to a discussion of salient contextual realities as identified by the FABC. The three Asian realities that will be addressed are: Asian religions, Asian cultures, and Asian socio-political realities, especially the poor. The most important questions surrounding these issues include: why are these particular three realities accepted as the most important, and how do they serve the Asian bishops as they venture in the Asian terrain in the attempt to make the Asian church truly Asian?

At the same time, however, it should be borne in mind that the FABC's bishops are Catholic bishops, who in their own respective dioceses represent the Roman Catholic Church and are indissolubly bound to the Roman Pontiff. The Church's long Tradition, hierarchical structures and also Roman liturgy<sup>56</sup> are visible marks of belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. Hence, one aim of the present study is to show that the Asian bishops encountered many challenges in their effort to contextualise and inculturate the Catholic Church in Asian contexts. One check point for assessing how the FABC managed to build bridges between the universal and the local is the role in the FABC theology of a theological notion originated from the early church, i.e., the *Logos spermatikos/Logoi spermatikoi* (Seed of the Word) and its derivatives. This concept appears many times in the FABC sources. Thus, it perhaps serves as a *terminus technicus* by which the FABC attempts to hold together the universal and the local aspects of Church's teaching.

Further, a hotly-debated question is that of the possible salvific nature of other religions. The Asian church lives in most of Asia in a minority position; it is therefore an inevitable matter that a local church must face. This topic merits a careful analysis, and with regard to this question some documents of the Church magisterium will be placed into conversation with the theological elaboration of the FABC. Is the church's position in Asia to only be a "giver", or can it maybe also learn something from adherents of other faiths? It also appears from the sources that the FABC addresses other religions in a comparative manner. Here one can speak even about a comparative theology. That is, we can speak here of a theology which is not merely academic discussion

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<sup>56</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC III, 38)) directs that the substantial unity of the Roman liturgy has to be preserved when liturgical books are revised and adapted. Most bishops' conferences that enjoy the full membership of the FABC follow the Latin Rite. However, there are two Indian bishops' conferences, i.e., Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara bishops' conferences, whose liturgies belong to Syrian Rites.

between different faiths, but rather a serious effort to find possible meeting points between and across religions so that one's own faith conviction and understanding is enriched by the encounter with those of others. The FABC's comparative theological approach to other religions has not been articulated much in earlier studies on the FABC's theology. Hence, a goal of this dissertation is to complement the understanding on theology of religions of the Federation.

In addition to Asian religions, the other two contextual realities are important as well. Asian cultures present a challenge for inculturation, and the socio-political realities, especially the Asian poor (–the majority of the population of Asia are poor–) constitute basic structures of Asia which an Asian church cannot ignore.

What is the positive contribution, the goodness, of Asian contextual realities? By choosing them as contextual realities, we can hypothesise that the FABC bishops accept them as good and useful contributors in the process of creating Asian contextual theology. Nevertheless, the bishops certainly have something to say about defects, or even sinfulness of these contextual realities. In a word, how does the FABC tackle the problem of sin and evil in the warp and woof of Asian societies and cultures?

The next chapter will examine the question of the relationship between *Logos*, Christ and the Spirit.<sup>57</sup> The Second Vatican Council had already taught that the Holy Spirit also operates outside of the church and specifically Christian dispensation.<sup>58</sup> This acceptance, however, poses a question whether the Spirit is always ontologically the third Person of the Trinity, or does the Spirit also operate without the necessary relationship with the Trinity. The FABC documents speak much about the Spirit and the *Logos*. What kind of Trinitarian teaching do the Asian bishops represent in their reception of Vatican II and in the midst of Asian contexts? This question has a direct bearing on the understanding of the created world and its goodness and also the possibility of attaining salvation outside the Christian dispensation.

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<sup>57</sup> The renowned Indian theologian Raimon Panikkar states that “the Logos is also the Logos of God, but that the Logos is not “all” of the Trinity, and the Spirit, although it may be inseparable of the living Christ, is not subordinate to the Logos.” Quoted from Panikkar's website under “Christophany”, [www.raimon-panikkar.org/english/gloss-christophany.html](http://www.raimon-panikkar.org/english/gloss-christophany.html) (Accessed May 4, 2016). Chia (2012, 30) cites Ratzinger's “Christ, Faith, Challenge”: The problem which arises in India, but also elsewhere, comes to expression in [Raimon] Panikkar's famous phrase: “Jesus is Christ, but is not (only) Jesus.”

<sup>58</sup> See e.g., *Gaudium et spes* 22.

The present study would not be complete as a study of the balance between the universal and the local dimensions of the church and its teaching without examining the ecclesiology developed by the Asian bishops. This discussion of ecclesiology will be done by studying the concept of the Asian faces of Jesus. Thus, ecclesiology is closely linked with Christology: what images and stories of Jesus can best mediate the core message of the Gospel? Are there significantly Asian ways of looking at Jesus? If yes, what then is their significance for the universal church? These faces and images will eventually lead into discussion of the church's mission amongst Asian peoples. Moreover, identifying the Asian faces of Jesus will likely have consequences on the theological methodology of the FABC; what kind of methodology is developed as suitable for presenting the Gospel in various Asian contexts?

After having completed the analysis of the above themes, we can expect to have amassed enough substantial material to be able to suggest how the Asian Catholic bishops have succeeded in their purpose of making the Catholic Church in Asia “truly Asian” while at the same time remaining “truly Catholic.” In other words, what kind of Asian contextual theology was developed during the more than forty years covered in the present study? In the concluding chapter we will also make some tentative observations about the latest developments and challenges which the FABC face as it continues its journey in pursuit of a fuller realisation of being truly Asian and truly Catholic.

As is evident from the above discussion, the main sources of this study consist of the FABC's own documents, which present the Asian bishops' understanding of the Catholic Church and faith in Asia. However, since the task of the present study is to examine the FABC's attempt towards a truly Asian Catholic Church, it will be necessary at specific points to pay attention to some documents of the Church's magisterium at certain points necessary. The FABC's existence and their theological enterprise is presumably an expression of reception of Vatican II and as such an Asian interpretation of what *aggiornamento* means in the Asian context. Thus, in addition to the Vatican II documents, a few other Vatican documents are also significant for the present study, e.g. Pope

Paul VI's *Ecclesiam suam*<sup>59</sup>, *Evangelii nuntiandi*<sup>60</sup>, John Paul II's *Redemptoris missio*<sup>61</sup> and *Dominus Iesus*<sup>62</sup>. These documents will provide a fruitful testing ground for detecting possible convergences and divergences between the local Asian Catholic theology as envisaged by the Asian bishops and the teaching of the Church universal as articulated by the Roman magisterium. Moreover, examination of the process around the production of the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*<sup>63</sup>, in whose process of creation the Asian Catholic bishops' conferences participated, is expected to reveal whether the magisterium and the Asian bishops were able to find an equilibrium regarding how best to fulfil the mission of the church in Asia.

The primary sources of this study are the documents of the FABC from the 1970 Asian Bishops' Meeting to the year 2012. The main sources of this dissertation are the FABC documents published in five separate volumes under the title *For All the Peoples of Asia, vols. 1-5*.<sup>64</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I have decided to treat the compilation of these five volumes as the most important documentation of the FABC, in the understanding that the documents produced by Federation best reflect the central themes addressed in the present study. The reason of choice of time frame is that those years cover the history of the FABC from the initial Asian Bishops' meeting until the end of the papacy of Benedict XVI. The resignation of him on February 28, 2013, arguably marked the end of an era. Although the present study analyses more than 40 years' worth of documentation produced by the FABC, my approach will not be primarily historical. Nonetheless, specific

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<sup>59</sup> *Ecclesiam suam*, Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the Church (written during the Council in 1963)  
[http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_06081964\\_ecclesiam.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html).

<sup>60</sup> *Evangelii nuntiandi* (from year 1975) Apostolic exhortation of his holiness Pope Paul VI to the episcopate, to the clergy and to all the faithful of the entire world, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html)

<sup>61</sup> *Redemptoris missio*, (from year 1990) On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html)

<sup>62</sup> Declaration *Dominus Iesus* on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (from year 2000), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html)

<sup>63</sup> Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* of the Holy Father John Paul II, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_06111999\\_ecclesia-in-asia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html)

<sup>64</sup> Quezon City: Claretian Publications. Volume 1 includes the documents from 1970-1991, volume 2 the documents from 1992-1996, volume 3 the documents from 1997-2001, volume 4 the documents from 2002-2006, and volume 5 the documents from 2007-2012. Hereafter the abbreviations of these sourcebooks will be referred to as FAPA 1, FAPA 2, FAPA 3, FAPA 4, and FAPA 5. The documents after the year 2012 can be found on the FABC website: [http://www.fabc.org/offices/csec/ocsec\\_fabc\\_papers.html](http://www.fabc.org/offices/csec/ocsec_fabc_papers.html).

observations or tentative suggestions about the development and maturation, or diminishing or disappearing of some themes or issues will be made in the course of this study.

The method of the present research is close reading and systematic analysis of the relevant written sources of the FABC. Systematic analysis provides philosophical and theological analysis of concepts, propositions, argumentation, presuppositions, and structures of thought in the theology of the FABC. The contextual factors affecting the thinking of the Asian bishops will also be identified. Hence, there is an inductive and constructive approach in the present study. In addition, developments in the history of ideas and beliefs will be noted, although comprehensive historical or genetic analysis is not attempted.

The composition of the sources makes the analysis of the FABC's thought a challenging effort, however. The time span of the sources poses a challenge, but also more importantly, the character of the material poses a greater challenge to the researcher. The material is primarily pastoral and written as a response to specific rising challenges as the Asian Church addressed the needs and challenges of the times as well as its Asian contexts.<sup>65</sup> Hence, in the words of the FABC, their theology is described as an "unfinished product" and characterised by "ambiguity, uncertainty and tenuousness."<sup>66</sup> In addition, the FABC does not exercise a position of authority above local episcopal conferences. The Federation is "a voluntary association of episcopal conferences in Asia, established with the approval of the Holy See. Its purpose is to foster among its members solidarity and co-responsibility for the welfare of Church and society in Asia. The decisions of the Federation are without juridical binding force; their acceptance is an expression of collegial responsibility."<sup>67</sup> At present, there are 19 Bishops' Conferences<sup>68</sup> who enjoy the membership of the FABC. In addition, the FABC also has nine associate members.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> This pastoral approach is described in one source as follows: "FABC pastoral-theological reflection is decidedly inductive-emerging from life's concrete realities." Mendoza (2008, 40, n 130) citing Kroeger 2003, 32 (*Becoming Local Church: Historical, Theological and Missiological Essays*). Chia (2003, 163) puts it this way: "The orientation of the many FABC statements also reflects the professed aims of the FABC. Specifically, they point to a federation whose focus is primarily pastoral, never theological nor doctrinal." Chia is certainly correct in emphasising the pastoral character; nonetheless, solid theological argumentation is certainly discernible in the FABC documents although it might not be arranged in the manner typical to standard Western theological systems.

<sup>66</sup> OTC Methodology, FAPA 3, 331.

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.fabc.org/about.html> (Accessed May 16, 2016)

<sup>68</sup> Bangladesh, India – CBCI, India - Syro-Malabar, India - Syro-Malankara, India - Latin Rite, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar, Pakistan Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, ROC, Thailand, Timor Leste, and Vietnam. <http://www.fabc.org/mem.html> (Accessed May 16, 2016)

<sup>69</sup> Hong Kong, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. <http://www.fabc.org/mem.html> (Accessed May 16, 2016)

The Federation website further clarifies the structure and organisation of the FABC:

“FABC functions through a hierarchy of structure consisting of the Plenary Assembly, the Central Committee, the Standing Committee, and the Central Secretariat.

The Plenary Assembly, the supreme body of FABC, is composed of all presidents of member-conferences or their officially designated episcopal alternates, Bishop-delegates elected by the member-conferences, associate members and members of the Standing Committee. The Plenary Assembly meets in ordinary session every four years.

The Central Committee, composed of the presidents of member-conferences or their officially designated episcopal alternates, oversees the implementation of the resolutions and instructions of the Plenary Assembly. This committee meets every two years.

The Standing Committee, composed of five Bishops elected from different parts of Asia, implements the resolutions and instructions of the Central Committee. It provides direct guidance and support to the Central Secretariat and other organs of FABC.

The Central Secretariat is the principal service agency and an instrument of coordination within the FABC and with outside offices and agencies. To assist the Central Secretariat are seven Offices each handling specialized ministry/area of concern.”<sup>70</sup>

The structure and hierarchy described above also explains the weight and authority of the statements of various functions of the FABC. A Plenary Assembly is held every four years<sup>71</sup>, and its statements bear the highest authority among various functions of the FABC. Yet, we must remember that the FABC is a voluntary organisation whose statements do not have any juridical authority with respect to local episcopal conferences. Nonetheless, Edmund Chia posits that

“[t]he statements which issue from the Plenary Assembly are, therefore, not only reflective of the experience of FABC but also very much accepted and endorsed by each and every episcopal conference. This is because the delegates, coming from the various episcopal conferences, have every opportunity to bring their experience and perceptions into the discussions ...”<sup>72</sup>

In addition to the statements of Plenary Assemblies, the statements from various institutes<sup>73</sup> can also be regarded as the voice of the bishops and the voice of the Asian Church; most programmes draw participation from all across Asia.<sup>74</sup> However, one cannot presume that all the documents published in the five volumes of *For All Peoples of Asia* as such are products of Asian bishops.

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<sup>70</sup> <http://www.fabc.org/about.html>. (Accessed May 15, 2016). This site also specifies the seven mentioned offices: Office of Human Development (OHD), Office of Social Communication (OSC), Office of Laity (OL), Office of Theological Concerns (OTC), Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy (OESC), Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA), Office of Evangelization (OE), Office of Clergy (OC), and Office of Consecrated Life (OCL).

<sup>71</sup> Plenary Assemblies are abbreviated as FABC 1-11. To date there have been eleven Plenary Assemblies, the latest of which was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Chia 2003b, 157.

<sup>73</sup> The above-mentioned offices have conducted colloquiums and run various Institutes, e.g., the Bishops' Institute of Theological Animation, the Bishops' Institute for Social Action, and the Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs.

<sup>74</sup> Chia 2003b, 159.

Miguel Quatra clarifies the question about the authority and authors of the various FABC documents as follows

It is therefore necessary that when we refer to “the thinking of the Asian bishops” or to “their vision” ..., we be aware that it is an abstraction or generalization. This however does not mean that there is practically no such thing as the “subject” of the FABC’s thinking. Rather, it can be said that such a generalization expresses a certain “universality” of the “theologizing subject” in the FABC. The *author* of the documents is in fact the Asian Church, or better, the community of Asian Churches...”<sup>75</sup> Hence, “they are not a collection of disparate documents with no link between them, as the various FABC meetings are not isolated moments. On the contrary, they can be compared to small phases of a journey ...”<sup>76</sup>

These clarifications certainly help in understanding the nature of the FABC documents. We can therefore argue that the corpus of FABC texts is a product of “collegial responsibility”, which means that they represent an authentic voice of the Asian Catholic Church. However, for the sake of simplicity and with the purpose of locating the major constitutive elements of the thinking of the Asian Catholic bishops, this study will treat them as one corpus, arranged and organised by the FABC itself.

After this short introduction to the structure of the FABC and nature of the sources, we turn next to the relevance of this current study and the nature of the contribution it seeks to make.

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<sup>75</sup> Quatra 2000, 23.

<sup>76</sup> Quatra 2000, 22.



## 1.5. Motivation of This Study and Earlier Research on the FABC's Theology

As of May 2016, the FABC homepage lists 31 doctoral dissertations on the theology of the FABC. What new aspects can yet another study produce? In addition to doctoral dissertations, there are also licentiate and master degree theses written on the FABC.<sup>77</sup>

A summary of doctoral dissertations on the theology of the FABC's theology has been published by James H. Kroeger in two volumes: *Theology from the Heart of Asia- FABC Doctoral Dissertations I (1985-1998), and II (1998-2008).*<sup>78</sup> These two volumes include the titles and contents of each dissertation. A perusal of this list reveals a great variety of themes: mission, ecclesiology, evangelization, laity, dialogue, Christology, pneumatology, ministry, and communication.<sup>79</sup> Areas that have been studied the most include ecclesiology, dialogue and missiology. The first doctoral dissertation was completed in 1985, on the subject of the ecclesiology of the FABC.<sup>80</sup> Since then, a variety of themes have been covered. An important theme, i.e., inculturation, has been studied from a variety of perspectives: inculturation in the Philippines<sup>81</sup>, mission as Inculturation<sup>82</sup> and inculturation in the Indonesian context.<sup>83</sup> However, almost all researchers in the area of the FABC are from Asian countries or of Asian origin, and several studies have a specific, geographically restricted theme

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<sup>77</sup> The titles of these studies are listed in chronological order at: <http://www.fabc.org/FABCRelatedStudies.html> (Accessed May 5, 2016)

<sup>78</sup> Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2008.

<sup>79</sup> In spite of my best efforts I have not been able to obtain a copy of each of these theses. Obviously most of the dissertations have not been published as a monograph. In addition, a few are apparently located only in one or two libraries in distant locations. For obtaining these valuable materials, I am grateful to Ms. Angelic Que who kindly assisted me by making copies of several dissertations stored in Ateneo de Manila University, the Philippines. This library is certainly the best source of dissertations. However, even they do not possess copies of all FABC-related dissertations.

<sup>80</sup> Putranta, C.B., *The Idea of the Church in the Documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences 1970-1982* (1985.) Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1985.

<sup>81</sup> Nemet, Ladislav, *Inculturation in the Philippines: A Theological Study of the Question of Inculturation in the Documents of CBCP and Selected Filipino Theologians in the Light of Vatican II and the Documents of FABC* (1994). Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1994.

<sup>82</sup> Nguyen Van Am, *Laity in Asia: Mission as Inculturation in the Documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*. (2001). Berkeley: Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, 2001.

<sup>83</sup> Rukiyanto, Bernardus, *A New Way of Being Church: A Study of Inculturation in the Church of Asia and the Church of Indonesia*. (2007). Cambridge: Massachusetts: Weston Jesuit School of Theology, 2007.

Other interesting themes cover the following topics: Asian theology of liberation<sup>84</sup>, evangelizing mission of the Church in contemporary Asia<sup>85</sup>, and ecclesiology which resurfaced as a topic of research at the end of the 1990's.<sup>86</sup> Towards the end of the 1990's and at the beginning of the new millennium, new topics have started to gain interest as topics of research into the theology of the FABC. These are for example The Reign of God/ Kingdom of God<sup>87</sup>, interreligious dialogue<sup>88</sup> and missiology.<sup>89</sup> Finally, a still more recent area of research interest with regard to the theology of the FABC is pneumatology in relation to ecclesiology.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Mariampillai, D. Bosco M., *The Emerging Asian Theology of Liberation in the Documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: 1974-1986*. Ottawa: Saint Paul University, 1993.

<sup>85</sup> Bula, Augustinus, *A Study of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church in Contemporary Asia in the Light of the Documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: 1970-1995*. Rome: Pontifical Urbaniana University, 1997.

<sup>86</sup> Thoppil, James, *Towards an Asian Ecclesiology: Understanding of the Church in the Documents of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) 1970-1995 and the Asian Ecclesiological Trends*. Rome: Pontifical Urbaniana University, 1998 and Alangaram, Arockiam, *Christ in the Asian Peoples: Towards an Asian Contextual Christology Based on the Documents of Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*. Catholic Theology Faculty Leopold-Franzens Universität, Innsbruck, Austria, 1998.

<sup>87</sup> Quatra, Miguel Marcello, *Regno di Dio e Missione della Chiesa nel Contesto Asiatico: Uno Studio sui Documenti della FABC (1970-1995)*. Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1998. A shortened version in English language is published under the title *At the Side of the Multitudes: The Kingdom of God and the Mission of the Church in the FABC Documents*. Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2000.

<sup>88</sup> These doctoral dissertations include: Punda Panda, Herman, *Towards Living Together in Harmony. A Study of Interreligious Dialogue as an Effort to Promote Harmony among Believers of Various Religions based on the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) Documents from 1970 to 1996*. Rome: Pontifical Urbaniana University, 2001, Chia, Edmund, *Towards a Theology of Dialogue: Schillebeeckx's Method as Bridge between Vatican's Dominus Iesus and Asia's FABC Theology*. Nijmegen: Catholic University of Nijmegen, 2003, and Mendoza, Ruben, *A Church in Dialogue with peoples of Other Faiths: A Journey to the Kingdom in the Spirit: The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1970-2007*. Louvain: Catholic University of Louvain, 2008.

<sup>89</sup> Tan, Jonathan, *"Missio ad Gentes" in Asia: A Comparative Study of the Missiology of John Paul II and the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)*. Washington: The Catholic University of America, 2002.

<sup>90</sup> Kadaliyil, Abraham, *Toward a Relational Spirit Ecclesiology in Asia: A Study on the Documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*. Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 2006, and Varayilan, Davis, *Pilgrim Church and the Holy Spirit: A Comparative Study of the Pneumatological Ecclesiology of Cardinal Yves Congar and the FABC Documents (1970-2005)*. Manila: Loyola School of Theology.

Several dissertations are devoted to a particular theme: those of M. Paikada<sup>91</sup>, L. Nemet<sup>92</sup>, V. Ezhanikatt<sup>93</sup>, M. Nam Ki Ok<sup>94</sup>, S. Anatriello<sup>95</sup>, C. Boromeo<sup>96</sup>, A. Thainese<sup>97</sup> and B. Rukiyanto<sup>98</sup>. These studies are understandable; they represent genuine efforts to create local Asian theologies in the contexts of their respective authors.

The theologically most thoroughgoing and insightful studies include the doctoral dissertations of Miguel Quatra<sup>99</sup>, Abraham Kadayil<sup>100</sup>, Edmund Chia<sup>101</sup>, Jonathan Tan<sup>102</sup>, Ruben Mendoza<sup>103</sup>, and Peter N. V. Hai.<sup>104</sup> Quatra argues that the idea of the Reign of God is an indispensable key to the interpretation of the FABC's theology. What are possible repercussions of this regnocentric approach to the Church's mission in Asia? Quatra examines the theme of the Reign of God from five perspectives: its universal, Christological, ecclesiological, historical and eschatological dimensions.

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<sup>91</sup> *Characteristics of an Indian Liberation Theology as an Authentic Christian Theology: A Study based on the Analysis of the Indian Situation and the Documents of CBCI and the FABC*. Münster: Westphalia University, 1988.

<sup>92</sup> *Inculturation in the Philippines: A Theological Study of the Question of Inculturation in the Documents of CBCP and Selected Filipino Theologians in the Light of Vatican II and the Documents of FABC*. Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1994.

<sup>93</sup> *Evangelization in India in the Light of Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*. Rome: Pontifical Urbaniana University, 1995.

<sup>94</sup> *Il Ruolo Evangelizzatore dei Fedeli Laici nel Contesto Socio-Religioso in Corea alla Luce dei Documenti della FABC dal 1980 al 1991*. Rome: Pontifical Urbaniana University, 1996.

<sup>95</sup> *Spirituality for the Laity in the Toungnu Diocese in the Light of the Documents of Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)*. Rome: International Carmelite College (Teresianum), 1999.

<sup>96</sup> *Priestly Formation in the Light of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Towards a Model in the Burmese Context*. Rome: International Carmelite College (Teresianum), 2002.

<sup>97</sup> *Laity in the Participatory Communion in the Local Church of Andhra: An Ecclesiological Inquiry Based on the Documents of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1970-2005*. Bangalore: Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, 2006.

<sup>98</sup> *A New Way of Being Church: A Study of Inculturation in the Church of Asia and the Church of Indonesia: A Roman Catholic Perspective*. Cambridge: Massachusetts: Weston Jesuit School of Theology, 2007.

<sup>99</sup> *Regno di Dio e Missione della Chiesa nel contesto Asiatico: Uno studio sui documenti della FABC (1970-1995)*. Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1998. A shortened version in English language is published under the title *At the Side of the Multitudes: The Kingdom of God and the Mission of the Church in the FABC Documents*. Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2000.

<sup>100</sup> See note 90 above.

<sup>101</sup> See note 88 above.

<sup>102</sup> See note 89 above.

<sup>103</sup> See note 88 above.

<sup>104</sup> *Lay People in the Asian Church: A Critical Study of the Role of the Laity in the Contextual Theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (1970-2001) with Special Reference to John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortations "Christifideles Laici" (1989) and "Ecclesia in Asia" (1999), and the Pastoral Letters of the Vietnamese Episcopal Conference*. Sydney: Australian Catholic University, 2009.

Abraham Kadayil's work is a solid presentation of the pneumatological ecclesiology of the FABC. Kadayil attempts to establish a mediating perspective between East (FABC) and West in the theology of Yves Congar.

Then, Edmund Chia in his careful analysis compares Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the faith's *Dominus Iesus* with the ways in which Asian bishops see the role of Jesus in Asia. Chia suggests that *Dominus Iesus* represents a Neo-scholastic, and as such dogmatic, approach whereas the FABC's method is dialogue, which, according to Chia, is obviously more appropriate approach in Asia.<sup>105</sup> Chia compares *Dominus Iesus* with the FABC material and highlights the differences of approach between *Dominus Iesus* and the FABC documents. He suggests that Schillebeeckx's theology could provide a bridge between Western and Eastern approaches.

Ruben Mendoza's dissertation on theology of religions of the FABC is a result of meticulous research; its results are quite convincing. Jonathan Tan's comparative study on the missiology of Pope John Paul II and the of the FABC is an interesting and insightful piece of work which seeks to establish what kind of "Asian" approach to church's mission the FABC has. Tan maintains that at certain points the FABC's theology of mission differs from that of the magisterium.<sup>106</sup>

In addition to above scholars, others have analysed the FABC's theological methodology. These include Peter N. V. Hai, who in his article *Fides Quarens Dialogum. Theological Methodologies of Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*,<sup>107</sup> attempts to analyse the theology of the FABC theology within the framework of Stephen Bevans' models of contextual theology. His analysis appears to be solid and well explicated but is far too brief to serve as a complete and satisfactory study of the FABC's contextual theology. Another remarkable study is Jonathan Y. Tan's scholarly and insightful paper entitled "*Theologizing at the Service of Life. The Contextual Methodology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)*".<sup>108</sup>

In addition to doctoral dissertations, a few shorter studies on specific themes in FABC's theology are useful in mapping in the Federation's theology already covered and studied themes. Some of these studies have been published under the head-title *FABC Papers*.<sup>109</sup> In addition, several books

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<sup>105</sup> The very title of Chia's dissertation is telling: *Towards a Theology of Dialogue*.

<sup>106</sup> I will address this question briefly in the subchapter 5.2.

<sup>107</sup> [http://aejt.com.au/2006/issue\\_8](http://aejt.com.au/2006/issue_8) (Accessed January 4, 2017)

<sup>108</sup> FABC-Papers 108, 2003.

<sup>109</sup> [http://www.fabc.org/offices/csec/ocsec\\_fabc\\_papers.html](http://www.fabc.org/offices/csec/ocsec_fabc_papers.html) (Accessed May 13, 2016).

refer to the theology of the FABC.<sup>110</sup> Such references and citations show the relevance of the theology of the FABC's theology also outside of Asia.

However, to the best of my knowledge no research to date has presented a coherent and complete picture of how the FABC addresses the "identity crisis" which was spelled out in the opening sentence of the present study: "If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future."

It is also noteworthy that most, if not almost all, serious studies of the FABC's theology have been produced by Catholic scholars, and that most of them are Asians or at least of Asian origin. Hence, despite being the most authoritative voice of the Asian Catholic Church, the FABC's voice has generally stayed within the confines of Asia and within the Catholic Church. I however argue that the FABC's theological developments and solutions are worth studying outside of these geographical and ecclesial confines. Main reasons for this argument are, first of all, Asia's importance as the world's biggest continent in terms of geographical area and population. Second, Asia as the birthplace of all major world religions, where adherents of various religions since the ancient times have been used to rub shoulders with each other, can contribute valuable experience and knowledge also for churches in other continents. Reflections and perhaps even solutions of Asian theological elaborations can perhaps teach how the church can coexist peacefully amongst other religions while preserving its authenticity and exercising its mission. Experiences of Asia are even more interesting as Christianity is but a minority in almost all of Asia. Asian reflections and perhaps even solutions can also give food for thought for members of Western churches who are sometimes bewildered with the declining numbers of church membership.

On the personal side, I have had the privilege of being involved with Asian churches for more than 20 years. Over 16 years as a missionary serving a small Lutheran church in Thailand have changed me irreversibly. Among the most fascinating but also difficult challenges have involved how to teach and interpret the Christian faith in a context which does not have deep Christian roots. In this context I have become a person of two cultures, continually suffering from cultural stress which is both a burden and blessing. During my years in Thailand I become involved with the Asian Catholic Church especially from the year 2005 when I attended the annual meeting of the Asian

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<sup>110</sup> See, e.g., the books and articles of Peter C. Phan, Felix Wilfred, Edmund Chia, or Stephen Bevans, among others.

Liturgy Forum (ALF) for the first time.<sup>112</sup> Questions regarding liturgical inculturation in Asia have been on the agenda of the ALF in various forms throughout the years. These immersions eventually introduced me to the treasures of the theology of the FABC theology and inspired me to begin pursuing serious studies on the Federation's theology.

As noted above, the Asian Catholic bishops' theology can certainly be understood as an example of reception of Vatican II together with an interplay and interpretation of the Church's Tradition in the midst of Asian contexts. These efforts can also be seen as process, journey, or pilgrimage. The chief goal of the following study is to attempt to create a passable road map of this journey, with the hope that, upon arrival into the final destination the most important landmarks, terrain and waterways and signposts will have been found. In other words, the goal of this study is to map how the Asian Catholic bishops responded to the challenge of creating a genuinely Asian theology while remaining genuinely and truly Catholic.

The journey will begin with discussing the significance of "being Asian", "Asianness" and also how these concepts relate to the West and Westernness

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<sup>112</sup> The Asian Liturgy Forum (ALF) was established by the FABC in 1996 to provide a forum for Catholics in Asia to discuss liturgical matters pertaining to each country. To date, I have attended nine annual ALF meetings, most of the time as the only non-Catholic participant. For my inclusion into ALF and the fascinating world of the FABC I am extremely grateful to the late Benedictine father Anscar Chupungco (1939-2013), primus motor and secretary of many years of ALF. I first visited Fr. Anscar at the Paul VI Institute of Liturgy in Malaybalay, Bukidnon, the Philippines in 1999. He had returned from Rome some years earlier and had founded the institute on the island of Mindanao. It was at the heartfelt invitation of Fr. Anscar that I was welcomed into the ALF where ecumenical friendship has always been extended to me by all participants. Fr. Anscar's immense wealth of knowledge, warm and humble hospitality and his wit have left a lasting impression on me.

## **2. Asian Contexts Challenge the Christian Gospel in Asia**

As the Asian bishops set out on their journey to find their identity as a truly Asian Catholic Church and with this a purpose to create an Asian-compatible, contextual theology, the definitions of the notions “Asian”, “being Asian”, and “Asianness” set important parameters for the FABC. In addition, as will be shown below, the FABC sees these notions quite often as contradictory to the concepts of “Western”, “being Western” and “Westernness”. It is therefore assumed that in order to understand the FABC’s theology, we need first examine what the FABC intends to say in using these seemingly opposite concepts. The Asian Catholic bishops’ clearly articulated purpose for the Church to become as “Asian” as possible inevitably led to many consequences for the ways in which the Christian gospel, especially its universality and its application in local contexts, interact with one another in Asia.

Thus, the first topic this chapter will analyze is “Asianness”: what are its components, and what kind of framework does it create for the FABC’s theology? Then the analysis will proceed to the notion of “Westernness”. Furthermore, one cannot gain an adequate picture of the FABC’s theology without taking a close look at other “Asian” concepts which characterise the theology of the Asian Catholic bishops. Among these the most significant are “harmony” and a worldview which the FABC bishops argue is organic and complementary. They constitute a certain configuration of characteristics of “being Asian” in the documents of the FABC.

### **2.1. Towards Being Asian**

#### **2.1.1. What Does “Asianness” Entail?**

Even the casual reader of the FABC documents soon realises that one significant motivation of the Asian bishops is the movement towards or an attempt to become as Asian a Church as possible. From the outset, this impetus to indigenise and incarnate the Gospel in Asia was on the FABC’s agenda-. As the 1970 Asian Bishops’ Meeting (ABM) states: “We also pledge ourselves to develop an indigenous theology and to do what we can so that the life and message of the Gospel may be

ever more incarnate in the historic cultures of Asia.”<sup>1</sup> Later, as the FABC developed its theological programme, the theme was revisited and further developed. For example, the FABC’s first plenary assembly (1974) phrases the very same intention as follows: “To preach the Gospel in Asia today we must make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our peoples. The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up a truly local church.”<sup>2</sup> This goal is also described using the notions of “being Asian”, or “Asianness”, as stated by the seventh Plenary Assembly: “We are committed to the emergence of the Asianness of the Church in Asia. This means that the Church has to be an embodiment of the Asian values of life, especially harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life.”<sup>3</sup>

The concept of being Asian, or “Asianness”, has several dimensions which require detailed discussion. Being Asian and Asianness seem to provide a broad framework within which the FABC develops its contextual theology. On the other hand, scholars have noted that the terms “Asian” and “Asianness” are themselves problematic concepts.<sup>4</sup> This being the case, what does the FABC intend to express when they employ these notions and when the FABC even seem to be constructing their theology within the framework of “being Asian” and “Asianness”? One can also ask if the FABC represents a type of Asian essentialism in its harmonising of the great diversity which exists in Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> ABM 13, FAPA 1, 9. This statement was made in 1970.

<sup>2</sup> FABC 1, 9, FAPA 1, 14. See the discussion in the Introduction chapter on the usage of the concepts “universal” and “local” in the FABC’s documents.

<sup>3</sup> FABC 7, FAPA 3, 8. The lexical term ‘harmony’ is found several hundreds of times in the FABC’s documents. This alone shows the importance of the notion. This will be analysed more fully below. The FABC also speaks about complementary way of thinking and *yin yang* as typically Asian, OTC, Methodology 1.4., FAPA 3, 337.

<sup>4</sup> Mendoza 2008, 20 n 45, writes on “Asianness”: “This is admittedly a problematic concept. For some, Asia is a geographic rather than an historical concept, conventional and convenient rather than anything concrete. For others, “Asia” or “Asianness” is misleading since it refers to something that does not really exist but is merely a construct of philosophers, politicians and scholars. There is, however, a growing collective consciousness on the part of Asians due in part to “the actual problems with which Asians are confronted, their common aspirations and expectations, and their realisation of their inter-dependence on account of geographical proximity.” Here Mendoza quotes Thoppil 2005, 16. Tan (2002, 226-227) also discusses the problem of essentialism in the FABC documents with regard to using the concepts “Asianness”, “Asian worldview”, “Asian experience”, “Asian epistemology,” etc. Tan (2002, 227) summarises his critique: “An approach which essentializes “Asianness” is problematic, because it tends to universalise the abstract, theoretical constructs in a manner that downplays the rich diversity and plurality of underlying Asian realities.” Tan’s observations are certainly correct, at least in terms of paying attention to the problematic use of “Asianness”. However, Tan perhaps does not discuss carefully enough in his critique what the FABC intends to say by choosing “being Asian” and “Asianness” as its genuine goals in the process of searching for their identity in Asia. Placing the entire vast continent of Asia under one single term can perhaps be compared to the discussion of the phenomenon of orientalism. A classical study of Orientalism is that of Edward Said (1978). He argues that “the Orient” and “Orientalism” are primarily Western constructs and reflect patronising attitudes and a largely romanticising idea of the East in contrast to the West. Said argues that Western orientalist claim to know and understand the East better than the East itself. King (1999, 3) comments on this question as follows: “Oriental essentialism has resulted in stereotypes about the West as well as about the East. There are a multiplicity of “Westes” hidden behind the veil of a homogenizing and ahistorical essentialism (occluded by myths of cultural/natural homogeneity).”



However, the Indian Catholic theologian Michael Amaladoss argues that there is a common understanding of Asianness which has emerged over the past fifty years. He considers this emerging Asianness perhaps to be the most important trend in Asian theology. Amaladoss includes South, Southeast, and East Asia in this emerging understanding of Asianness.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the FABC's documents mostly seem to discuss matters pertaining to these Asian regions.<sup>6</sup> It is also important to note that this emerging Asianness has predominantly been articulated by Asian theologians themselves. Therefore, according to Amaladoss, it reveals a genuine attempt by Asian theologians themselves to develop authentic Asian theologies.

To address this challenge of defining Asianness, the Federation's first Plenary Assembly articulated the general and overall aim of the FABC: "The church must be local in its songs, in its artistry, in its architecture, in its thoughts and language, in its way of life. As God became one of us – to make us His own – His Church in Asia must be Asian."<sup>7</sup> Thus, first of all, "Asian" and "being Asian" mean "to become local." It is no wonder then that the thrust towards becoming as Asian a church as possible has been on the agenda of the FABC from the beginning. Indeed, this is reiterated in the 1977 report of the Asian Colloquium of the FABC: "Asian Churches then must become truly Asian in all things."<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is important to note that here Asianness first and foremost signifies the primacy of becoming local.

Another important definition for "Asianness", as identified by the Asian bishops, is that Asianness is significantly different from "Westernness", and this difference constitutes the framework in which the FABC intends to create an Asian Catholic theology. As this is the case, it is a valid to ask, whether in the minds of the Asian bishops Asianness represents merely the opposite pole to Westernness and represents an attempt to decolonise the Church in Asia and theology and remove from it its Western vestiges. How inherently Asian are "being Asian" and "Asianness"? Moreover, what kinds of differences between Asia and the West do the FABC documents identify?

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<sup>5</sup> Amaladoss 2014, 104.

<sup>6</sup> Here it may help in understanding the FABC's thrust to become as Asian as possible to think of this goal through the composition of the FABC. Its body consists of episcopal conferences from different parts of Asia; it is not reasonable to assume that all the members share a common vision and thinking. Their geographical locations, histories, cultures, contexts and many other features differ from one another. Hence, Asia in its vastness is certainly a diverse continent.

<sup>7</sup> FABC 1, 10, FAPA 1, 22. Usage of the concepts 'local', 'particular' and 'universal' in the general parlance of the Catholic Church, especially in the documents of the Second Vatican Council was outlined in the Introduction. As noted there, the FABC opts primarily for the term 'local' instead of 'particular'.

<sup>8</sup> Asian Colloquium 26, FAPA 1, 72.

Furthermore, how much do these identified differences affect theology? These questions have been widely discussed among Asian theologians.<sup>9</sup>

Parallel to the distinction between “Asian” vs. “Western” is the question about the relationship between the universal and local dimensions of the church and its theology. The texts cited above appear to accent the local dimension of the church. This emphasis suggests that for the Asian Catholic bishops “being Asian” means, by and large, a non-Western, incarnated and inculturated Church.

Nonetheless, at the same time it appears that the FABC’s intention is also not to lose sight of the universal character of the Christian faith: universality implies universal truths.<sup>10</sup> But these truths need to be expressed and lived out in the framework of local contexts. Consequently, the Asian bishops put much effort and energy into their effort to create a genuinely Asian Church and theology while at the same time standing firmly on the ground of the Catholic faith. A perusal of the FABC documents highlights that the challenges for the bishops in this regard have not been insignificant. In the words of the Theological Advisory Committee (TAC)<sup>11</sup> of the FABC: “... the compatibility of theological pluralism with the unity of the universal Church is a new theological problem which should not be underestimated.”<sup>12</sup> This sentence accentuates a major challenge for

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<sup>9</sup> Edmund Kee-Fook Chia (2012, 127-150) analyses the differences between the Western and Asian approaches regarding how the Church’s teaching should be presented in Asia. Representative of the Western approach in Chia’s analysis is the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) declaration *Dominus Iesus*. Chia identifies the following differences between the Western and the Asian approaches: the declaration is built on the neo-scholastic approach and emphasises the human function of reason. Here revelation is described as “truth” or the “deposit of faith”. While the term “truth” is used tens of times, the word “love” appears only few times and the term “justice” not at all. Further, in *Dominus Iesus* the accent is on logical reason and truth, while, in Asia the emphasis is on the elements of praxis: love, peace, justice, etc. Moreover, in Asia the Church is faced with a religious pluralism in which the answers of the neo-scholastic method are inadequate. It is not easy to simply translate Western theological concepts into Asian languages; languages, cultural, religious and philosophical traditions make the task extremely difficult. The FABC’s primary solution for approaching the peoples of Asia in their own contexts is dialogue. This was clear to the Asian bishops even before the inception of the FABC in the Asian Bishops’ Meeting of 1970. Yet another difference between the West and East, according to Chia, is the difference of worldviews; here Chia quotes Felix Wilfred who defines the Western worldview as “architectonic” and the Asian as “organic”. The architectonic worldview is based upon a reality conceived in terms of individuality and separateness, whilst the Asian worldview sees reality in terms of relationship and is emphatic about the harmonious integration of the community. Chia 2012, 129. Edmund Chia served as executive secretary of interreligious dialogue of FABC from 1996-2004. He is now on the faculty of the Australia Catholic University, Melbourne.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., the Eighth Plenary Assembly of the FABC affirms that “The Church has perennially held that there are universal truths, though admittedly expressed with the limitations of language and culture.” FABC 8, 87, FAPA 4, 33.

<sup>11</sup> The TAC is considered as the major theological instrument of the FABC, composed competent Asian theologians. The TAC’s was later renamed as The Office for Theological Concerns (OTC).

<sup>12</sup> TAC, Methodology 2.3., FAPA 3, 355. See Amaladoss (2014, 115-116) who enumerates important issues that Asian theology has to pay attention to: “I think that, first of all, Asian theology must develop a vision of pluralism and harmony.”

the FABC. The FABC identifies the compatibility of theological pluralism with the unity of the universal Church as a new theological problem. The novel nature of the problem also indicates that it has not been adequately analysed, nor have solutions been found. Because it is Catholic, the FABC cannot deny the Church's doctrinal heritage, part of which is connected with Western traditions. At the same time, however, the bishops fervently seek to inculturate the Gospel in Asia where a plurality of expressions is present. Hence, the challenge between the universal and the local character of the Christian faith and Church is present from the very beginning of the existence of the Federation, and this challenge is substantial.

It seems that in their process of becoming "Asian" the Asian bishops had to bridge a gap between different worldviews, philosophies and conceptual notions as they attempted to develop an Asian theology which would nevertheless be faithful to the tradition of the Catholic Church. Moreover, as the Asian bishops began their enterprise of creating a church and theology as Asian as possible, they could not know for sure what they would come across along the way. The journey had "a certain experimental character, a certain ambiguity, uncertainty and tenuousness". It is described as a pilgrimage.<sup>13</sup> Hence, for the FABC, "being Asian" and "Asianness" do not seem to be precisely defined terms, but rather they are the bishops' strong conviction which characterise and guide their journey. To begin with, identifying similarities and differences between "Asia" and "the West" is an important starting point which helps the FABC as they attempt to map the road ahead.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Asian theology is a new enterprise marked by a certain experimental character, a certain ambiguity, uncertainty and tenuousness. It is not yet a finished product, given the dynamic nature of the theological enterprise envisioned. It is rather a pilgrimage." TAC, Methodology, FAPA 3, 331.

<sup>14</sup> Sebastian Painadath's characterisation of the differences of the religions of Semitic and Indian origins is to some extent parallel to some important lines of thought in the FABC. In Painadath's analysis, religions of Semitic origin approach the Divine as a personal God, which produces an interpersonal relationship between the human person and God (I –Thou). This relationship consists of a dialectic between revelation and response. In this dialectic, disobedience to God's word and will is sin. God enters the lives of human persons through events in history, which makes history salvation history. God's salvific events are experienced in a community of believers. Thus, God's revelation takes place in history and through the community. Consequently, devotional practices and structural rituals become significant in the practical religious life of believers. In addition, regulations, dogmas and rubrics become important in shaping and safeguarding the religious life of the faithful. Painadath 1997, 8-16 (FABC Papers No. 83). Painadath's remarks are notable and may have affected the FABC's theology. Although the FABC's theological deliberations are conducted collegially, many papers the FABC produced are products of thorough discussion. In general, FABC Papers represent part of this theologising process. Painadath himself is an Indian Jesuit priest and the founder of the Indian spirituality ashram centre *Sameeksha* in Kerala, India. See more on Painadath, Evers 2008, <http://www.forum-weltkirche.de/de/personen/13760.sebastian-painadath-sj.html> (Accessed May 7, 2017) Painadath further analyses the differences between Eastern and Western spiritualities. He contends that religions originating in India reflect the transpersonal approach to the Divine, which ultimately is an absolute mystery. In search of the Divine, one goes beyond all names and forms. The waking up to the Mystery takes place in contemplative silence as one enters into deeper levels of consciousness and experiences oneness with the 'Ground of being'. Spirituality here is apophatic, and opaqueness to the Divine Light is sin. Sin is also described as ignorance not realising what one truly is. In this Asian model, spirituality receives a cosmic dimension which leads to a holistic vision of reality which can also be described as enlightenment. Salvation produces a progressive liberation from egoism. In this

However, the primary intention of the FABC is not to provide a detailed analysis of all possible nuances of the “East” and “West.” Rather, the primary emphasis seems to be in making the Gospel present and incarnated in Asian contexts in the best possible way. The Asian bishops’ experience is that the Christian faith in the forms it had until now been presented in Asia have by and large proven unsuccessful. They place these forms into the rather broad category of “Westernness”. How is Westernness understood in the FABC documents? The next subchapter addresses this question.

### **2.1.2. Westernness versus Asianness**

What does the notion of “Westernness” imply? First, the Office of Evangelization (OE) of the FABC notes that “[a]s a social institution the Church is perceived as a foreign body in its colonial origins while other world religions are not. ... The Church remains foreign in its lifestyle, in its institutional structure, in its worship, in its Western-trained leadership and in its theology. Christian rituals often remain formal, neither spontaneous nor particularly Asian.”<sup>15</sup> Here, foreignness is therefore the lingering image and vestiges of colonialism, which can be seen in the Church’s

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model, the Divine is experienced as the transpersonal ‘Ground of being’. In religious practices, spirituality centres and spiritual masters (guru) are essential. Painadath maintains that the two aforementioned approaches to spirituality are not mutually exclusive. Rather, he describes them as two poles dialectically related in the evolution of an integrated spirituality. A successful integration would result in a new spirituality nourished by a mystical perception of harmony and by a prophetic commitment to integral liberation. This kind of spirituality has still been lacking in Asia, where the Semitic elements of spirituality and European thought patterns have been dominant at the expense of intuitive and mystic dimensions. Painadath suggests that for the church to be meaningful in Asia, the mystical dimension needs to be emphasised in the life and thought of the churches. This approach presupposes openness to the Spirit of God in other religious communities. Hence, Painadath seems to propose that ‘Asianness’ does not necessarily exclude ‘westernness, rather, a new spirituality which is faithful to both sides could evolve through the integration of these two. Painadath 1997, 9-13.

However, Painadath’s approach is open to criticism. For example, does he not overlook basic epistemological and even ontological differences between faith systems? A large question is that of the ontological character of the “ground of being”. In theistic religious traditions, different opinions can perhaps converge and find agreement by arguing that different names for the “Ultimate Reality” or “Absolute” of “God” are merely linguistic and conceptual differences, and the “God-beyond-God” is discernible. According to Painadath (1997, 11), this is the basic dynamics of apophatic spirituality. Yet the questions e.g. related to other crucial matters such as salvation vs. liberation etc. and different ways to achieve that goal remain in dispute. Even larger problems in harmonising different ontologies occur when one wishes to find convergences between theistic and non-theistic (e.g. Theravada Buddhism) religions. It seems to be that Painadath ‘cut corners’ in his attempt to achieve an integration of substantially different epistemological and ontological faiths and philosophical systems. The FABC’s stand on these questions will be discussed in more detailed manner below in comparison of the FABC’s documents are compared to teaching of other religions.

<sup>15</sup> Office of Evangelization (OE), Consultation 13, FAPA 2, 195. Similarly: “We are still seen as very western in our religious practices. Christian communication should help towards a more inculturated Church in using more Asian symbols and communicative expressions. Within the Church, liturgical celebrations especially homilies should be communicative and respond to the real needs and feelings of people.” FABC-OSC 2, FAPA 3, 167.

“traditional ecclesiastical structures and economic dependence on the west.”<sup>16</sup> This dependence may even have implications for national integration and religious and cultural identity.<sup>17</sup> This perceived foreignness also affects the way in which theology is taught in theological seminaries.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, it is easy to find in the FABC’s documents a certain kind of reticence toward Christian history as it has unfolded in Asia. This reluctance is not defined *a priori*, but rather is the result of having experienced it for centuries.<sup>19</sup> This reticence takes the form of an experienced incompatibility of the Christian faith in its Western form with Asian contexts. The Word of God does not bear fruit as it should. Christ remains very much un-incarnated. In nearly all Asian countries, Christianity is a minority religion and has not managed to penetrate Asian soil and become properly rooted there.<sup>20</sup> The church’s mission does not bear as much fruit as it should. Therefore, the main object of the Asian bishops seems to be not a general resistance against a Western paradigm, but rather an attempt to identify ways of how better to proclaim the Christian message in Asia. Here the TAC also launches criticism of Western missionary enterprises. In their attempt to convert the ‘heathens’, missionaries imposed Western ways and thought on Asian people and also undermined the value and dignity of the cultures of these peoples.<sup>21</sup>

The FABC further develops its analysis by pitting Asian cultures against Western cultures. It should be noted, however, that the FABC does not argue that Western cultural patterns are less valuable or worse, but simply that many of them are counterproductive in Asia. As noted earlier, “Western” is equated with foreign.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Western structures such as colonialism and classical capitalism, together with feudalism, have contributed to the disruption of the economics of Asian societies.<sup>23</sup> Reticence toward and critique of Western models is found in the texts of the early

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<sup>16</sup> OE, Conclusions, 13, FAPA 1, 337.

<sup>17</sup> OE, Conclusions, 13, FAPA 1, 337.

<sup>18</sup> “Seminary formation often alienates the seminarian from the people. Biblical, systematic and historical theology as taught are often unpastoral and un-Asian. We need a new hermeneutic suitable for the Asian idiom.” OE, Conclusions, 13, FAPA 1, 337.

<sup>19</sup> For a clear presentation on the different phases of the changing paradigms of Asian Christian attitudes to other religions, see Ariarajah 2014-347-367. For a solid presentation on identity and marginality of Christians in Asia, see Tang 2015, 80-97.

<sup>20</sup> According to [pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org) –statistics Christians make up about 7.1 % of the total population of Asia-Pacific, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/asia-pacific/> (Accessed January 14, 2017)

<sup>21</sup> TAC, Harmony, 2.4., FAPA 2, 255.

<sup>22</sup> BIRA IV/2, 3, FAPA 1, 251-252: “We see the Church as struggling to free herself from her historical burden, e.g., from the stigmata of being foreign to the eyes of both her own children and the peoples of Asia, and from the scars of being attached to alienating structures. She is still endeavoring to set herself free from the vestiges of western and colonial influences.”

<sup>23</sup> BISA IV, 4, FAPA 1, 212. Feudalism, of course, is not merely a western phenomenon.

1990's, as the FABC documents maintain that the Asian Church as a social institution is perceived as a foreign body because of its colonial origins. This makes the Church foreign in the eyes of Asians. The analysis concludes with a blunt sentence by the Office of Evangelization: "The Church is an institution planted in Asia rather than an evangelizing community of Asia."<sup>24</sup>

It is also interesting to note that the theme of the foreignness of the Western form of Christianity and its incompatibility with Asian contexts has been a perennial theme throughout the existence of the FABC. As late as 2010, The Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) of the FABC could write: "Moreover, Churches in Asia are not fully inculturated and carry still the trappings of Western culture and signs of the colonial era."<sup>25</sup> This statement indicates that it is the opinion of the FABC that, despite strenuous efforts, "Westernness" still remains a problem and an obstacle to successful inculturation.

It seems that differences between East and West also extend to worldviews, which in turn becomes visible in the area of religious language and hermeneutics. In the understanding of the FABC, Eastern philosophies and worldviews have a holistic approach to the "Ultimate Reality", whereas the West tends to put emphasis on the intellect and the will and the distinction between transcendence and immanence.<sup>26</sup> An "Asian way" should naturally have an effect on how the Christian faith is articulated in Asia. How far apart from each other are these two poles, the East and the West?

Viewed from certain angles, they seem to be quite far apart. Westernness can be characterised in specific terms, and Asianness represents its opposite pole in other respects. However, in stressing the need to be as Asian as possible, the Asian bishops recognise that there are several possibilities

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<sup>24</sup> OE, Consultation, 15, FAPA 1, 338.

<sup>25</sup>FABC Papers 133, 8. In this context Western 'trappings', together with divisions among Christians, are seen as obstacles to Christian witness in Asia. They are viewed actually as counter-witnesses. C.f. Ariarajah (2014, 353): "This predominant approach [mission as displacement] within the missionary paradigm, which is still very much a part of one of the contemporary streams of missionary thinking and practice, alienated the majority within other religious traditions; they looked upon Christians as arrogant, ignorant, and intolerant. This is the negative side of Christian relationship to Asian religions one is still seeking to repair today."

<sup>26</sup> "In this way, one avoids understanding religious language simply as an expression of an objective reality (which is not denied), or simply a subjective experience (which would be fideistic). This hermeneutical approach is especially appropriate to an Asian way of doing theology as it has a greater affinity with Asian cultures. Whereas occidental philosophy tends to overemphasize a duality of the intellect and the will, transcendence and immanence, an Eastern approach tends to see everything in a non-dualistic way. Whereas Western philosophy tends to be rationalistic, Eastern philosophy has a holistic approach to the Ultimate Reality. The worldview of Asians, therefore, is the way of holistic experience, the way of being, rather than that of thinking and rationalizing." OTC Methodology 5.1.4., FAPA 3, 408.

for characterising an “Asian way” of seeing things. The Theological Advisory Commission states that the FABC Plenary Assembly “encompassed in its vision all Asian peoples with their immense variety of cultures and faiths.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, another Plenary Assembly, when discerning “the Asian Way”, acknowledges that “Asia is a cultural mosaic shining with its rich diversity.”<sup>28</sup> Yet another OTC text states that “the rich and multiple resources of cultures, religions, movements, struggles and life-experiences of the Asian peoples [are] the context and locus of God’s presence and action, and of the work of the Spirit.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, “Asianness” consists of local Asian cultural, religious and life-experiences of Asian peoples, which are naturally varied and diverse depending on each particular time and situation.<sup>30</sup>

After having examined at the seemingly important notion of “Asianness” - as characterised by the FABC, one is tempted to suggest that in their strong conviction and thrust to become “truly Asian” in all things, the Asian Catholic bishops represent a certain kind of Asian essentialism. This can be detected in the bishops’ use of the term “Asianness” as something opposite to the West. In their attempt to decolonise theology from its western vestiges and perceived foreign structures, the Federation ends up creating another category in which “Asia” and “Asianness” becomes the decisive framework for an Asian compatible contextual theology.<sup>31</sup> This kind of essentialist understanding of Asianness can be prone to a cultural romanticism which neglects the existing defects of cultural phenomena. There seems to be this kind of flavour to the FABC’s thought.

On the other hand, we can ask if there is perhaps more in the Asian bishops’ choice of emphasising “Asianness”? Above we noted Amaladoss’ comment regarding how the “emerging Asianness” is one of the most important theological trends in Asia.<sup>32</sup> It appears now that we can suggest that the FABC’s pursuit of becoming truly Asian, and their choice of the keyword “Asianness”, do represent

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<sup>27</sup> TAC, Asian Christian perspectives on harmony 4.7, FAPA 2, 281.

<sup>28</sup> FABC 7, III, FAPA 3, 8.

<sup>29</sup> OTC, Methodology, Conclusion, FAPA 3, 419.

<sup>30</sup> Mendoza (2008, 20) is correct in his analysis: “It is important to consider that this emerging consciousness will necessarily have different cultural expressions. Being “Asian” for the FABC refers to the rootedness of the Christian faith in the cultural and historical realities of the people. Thus, notwithstanding similarities and commonalities, being an Asian Christian for a Filipino Christian will have a different expression than for, say, a Japanese Christian. But the point is that in the mind of the FABC, a particular concept, value or practice is Asian as long as it is expressive of the culture and rooted in the lives of a particular people of Asia.”

<sup>31</sup> Mendoza 2008, 10 n28, has a few pointed observations and questions about this “Asianness”. The efforts towards categorising it can be seen as attempts to decolonize theology by challenging Western constructions of theology and to reformulate theologies which would be free from being tools of colonial masters. In Mendoza’s opinion, Asian theologians need to exercise self-criticism about their dependency on an identity which is the result of a category of difference designed by the West (!). For short introduction to decolonisation of theology, see Rayan 1988.

<sup>32</sup> See page 41

a certain kind of terminological essentialism. On the other hand, the components making up the phenomenon of Asianness consist of the plurality of cultural and other contextual realities with which the Catholic Church in Asia as a minority Church (in the most part of Asia) has to live with. Thus, it does not seem like a fair and correct judgment to claim that the FABC's discussion of Asianness *in toto* represents an unspecified essentialism utilised merely as a counterpole to West/Westernness. There are genuine and inherently Asian elements in Asian realities, and the FABC seems to receive them as significant contributors to their process of becoming truly Asian.

To support the foregoing argument regarding the significance of Asianness as a plausible goal of the work of the FABC, we should also note that the Asian Catholic bishops are not the sole representatives who attempt to define their purpose of presenting the Gospel in Asia in an contextually applicable way by using the concept of "being Asian". Pope John Paul II, in his 1999 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, (EA) (promulgated following the Asian Synod) after having described religious and cultural realities of Asia<sup>33</sup>, summarises the way in which the Gospel should be communicated in an Asian way: "This "being Asian" is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the Gospel in a way which is faithful both to her own Tradition and to the Asian soul."<sup>34</sup>

*Ecclesia in Asia* is a document in whose formulation representatives of Asian Catholic Bishops' conferences participated. Thus, the theological thought of the bishops,- and of the FABC, - has certainly affected the text of EA. It is therefore important to note that the intention of becoming Asian and being Asian as a way of presenting the Gospel in Asia is also affirmed by the Pope.

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<sup>33</sup> " The people of Asia take pride in their religious and cultural values, such as love of silence and contemplation, simplicity, harmony, detachment, non-violence, the spirit of hard work, discipline, frugal living, the thirst for learning and philosophical enquiry.<sup>10</sup> They hold dear the values of respect for life, compassion for all beings, closeness to nature, filial piety towards parents, elders and ancestors, and a highly developed sense of community.<sup>11</sup> In particular, they hold the family to be a vital source of strength, a closely knit community with a powerful sense of solidarity.<sup>12</sup> Asian peoples are known for their spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Without denying the existence of bitter tensions and violent conflicts, it can still be said that Asia has often demonstrated a remarkable capacity for accommodation and a natural openness to the mutual enrichment of peoples in the midst of a plurality of religions and cultures. Moreover, despite the influence of modernization and secularization, Asian religions are showing signs of great vitality and a capacity for renewal, as seen in reform movements within the various religious groups. Many people, especially the young, experience a deep thirst for spiritual values, as the rise of new religious movements clearly demonstrates." EA 6 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_06111999\\_ecclesia-in-asia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html) (Accessed July 12, 2016)

<sup>34</sup> EA 6.



“Becoming Asian” and “being Asian” are not merely ideas of the FABC, but rather they denote a more general thrust which characterises several contextual theologies across Asia.

The question of Asianness also touches upon the relationship between the universal and the local which was also on the agenda of the 1998 Asian Synod. There the Asian Catholic bishops met with Pope John Paul II and the Roman curia officials to discuss the challenges they faced on the threshold of the new millennium.<sup>36</sup> How do the papal and curial teaching offices and local episcopal conferences view each other’s roles? Certainly, in the theology of the FABC, the universality or catholicity of the Church must be preserved.<sup>37</sup> Catholicity is one perennial mark of the Church. But if the significance of the context comes to be overly stressed, what eventually is left of the catholicity or universality of the Church? The Church’s catholicity cannot be questioned or compromised. Catholicity, however, cannot be an abstract principle; it becomes concrete in the faith

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<sup>36</sup> Peter C. Phan has compiled and edited a very useful book on the discussions and procedures of the 1998 Asian Synod (the book was published in 2002) On the issue discussed here, he reports a comment from an Indonesian bishop who spoke on behalf of the Indonesian Bishops’ Conference: “The Catholic Church is not a monolithic pyramid! Bishops are not branch secretaries waiting for instructions from the Headquarters! We are a communion of local Churches.” (Phan 2002a, 5). This same bishop, Francis Hadisumatra, continued: “A local Church becomes truly local when its laws are not only line with the Spirit of the Gospel and ecclesial norms but also with the ethos and the legal traditions of the local people....Theology, spirituality, law, and liturgy should be as diverse as our languages and cultures.” On the role of the Roman curia, he argued: “The Roman curia would then become a clearinghouse for information, support, and encouragement rather than a universal decision maker.” Bishop Hadisumatra concluded his address by calling for the possibility of establishing new patriarchates: “This vision, where episcopal conferences would have the trust and authority to evangelize –in dialogue with the poor, with cultures, and with other faith-traditions, is both ancient and new. Do we have the imagination to envisage the birth of new patriarchates, say the Patriarchate of South Asia, of Southeast Asia, and of East Asia? These new patriarchates, conciliar in nature, would support, strengthen, and broaden the work of individual episcopal conferences. As the episcopal conferences, in communion with neighboring conferences in the same (new) patriarchate, move forward in mission, new Catholic Rites would come into existence. Thus, we envisage a radical decentralization of the Latin Rite – devolving into a host of local Rites in Asia.” Phan 2002a, 120. Bishop Hadisumatra was not alone in his concerns. Bishop Arturo M. Bastes from the Philippines voiced his concerns especially in the area of Church’s pastoral ministry, saying that Asian realities have been neglected in the Church’s pastoral practices. There is a need to shift the perspective from a Euro-Centred Church to an Asian Church. Phan 2002a, 92. Moreover, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan in their response to the Synodal Secretariat’s preparation documents (*Lineamenta*) for the Synod called for a more kenotic approach in the area of Christology so as to be in solidarity with the people in a more humble way. Also, the Japanese bishops missed the images of the Church as people of God and the Church as servant in the documents. Further, the Japanese bishops noted that the *Lineamenta* was based on traditional scholastic theological ‘distinctions’ and ‘differences’ which are not compatible in Asia which searches for creative harmony more than for distinctions. The Japanese bishops also lamented the fact that the *Lineamenta* lacks understanding of the Asian cultures, is based on the theology of the Christian West, and to the eyes of non-Christians appears as self-complacent and introverted. Phan 2002a, 30-31.

These few examples show the dissatisfaction among Asian Catholic bishops with theology and practices in the current Roman Catholic Church. Critical voices have come from different parts of Asia, representing different cultural and religious contexts. A common request from Asia is to receive more independence for local episcopal conferences and more trust and confidence from Rome.

<sup>37</sup> 1977 Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church stresses the important of catholicity as communion of local churches with each other, in which the Bishop of Rome is the presider “In this bond of union lies the guarantee of the true apostolicity and catholicity of each local church.” Asian Colloquium 27, FAPA 1, 73.

and the life of the Church. This dynamic inevitably leads to local, particular churches. The Church universal is represented (one can certainly also say incarnated) in local churches.<sup>38</sup>

We can now ask: do the articulated disparities between Asianness and Westernness affect the interpretation and application of the Gospel? Can “East” and “West” remain together, or can they perhaps be integrated together to some extent?<sup>39</sup>

Above, we noted that the FABC identifies notable differences between East and West. Consequently, these argued differences appear to have much influence on the ways in which the FABC creates an Asian contextual theology. Traces and imprints of those differences are easily recognisable in the theology of the FABC. The sources do not yield a clear and resounding yes or no to the question of whether Asianness and Westernness as understood by the FABC are compatible. Apparently, they do not represent two diametrically opposite poles. On the other hand, for the sake of the task of inculturation the FABC expresses an urgent need to find Asian-compatible ways of transmitting the gospel and Christian faith in Asia.

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<sup>38</sup> Komonchak (1986,35) notes that the universal dimension of the Church ought not to lead into uniformity, the imposition of a single model of a specific and particular place and context as such in new places. This approach is sometimes called the ‘Euro-centric’ model. In this model the centre serves as the source and model for local applications. On the other hand, local Churches could be at risk of identifying the catholicity of the church with locality and concreteness in a manner which results in losing sight of the requirement of communion with the other Churches. In addition, there is a risk of ethnocentrism and the reduction of Christianity to its local manifestation.

<sup>39</sup> For example, see how Chia 2012 (128-129), following the elaboration of Felix Wilfred, describes the differences between the western and eastern worldviews. Chia especially notes how Asian worldview is relational; reality is conceived as relationships among the parts. Applied to theology, this means that Asian theology must be a theology of dialogue. The Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC (FABC Papers 133, 38) distinguishes between pluralism (plurality), relationality (relatedness) and relativism as follows: “This [awareness of one’s Christian identity and respect for the faith of others at the same time] requires that the Asian Christian understands, clarifies and adequately expresses on an existential level the all-important distinction between pluralism, relatedness and relativism and its implications. Speaking in general terms, pluralism is intrinsic to the multi-dimensionality of human experience; Relationality, on the other hand, refers to the “relatedness” of reality; Relativism, instead, maintains that the human being can only attain approximations, not the truth. In its core, this latter tends to be a negation of all realism.” Questions like the one above are intensively discussed in the field of theology of religions. It seems to be quite common, perhaps ‘human’, to try to compromise and harmonise existing difference between religions. The more different religions are especially in their epistemology and ontology, the more difficult it becomes to harmonise their divergences. Tilakaratne (2004, 387) names John Hick as an example of a theologian “...who subscribes to the view that ultimately all religious experiences refer to one and the same Transcendental ... and analyses ultimate soteriological goals across religions and classifies them into two, namely, personae and impersonae of the Transcendental.” Here, personae is a personal representation of ultimate religious experience as God, Allah, Ishvara, etc. whereas impersonae refers to non-personal representations such as Nirvana, Tahata, Brahman, the Way, etc. Tilakaratne criticises this approach as reductionist putting all religions into one category and not respecting real differences. He also argues that Aloysius Pieris for example belongs to this same category when Pieris speaks about the primordial liberative core of all religions, which in Tilakaratne’s understanding cannot be anything other than Hick’s basic idea. Tilakaratne 2004, 387-391.

Furthermore, the motivation behind the thrust of creating an Asian-compatible contextual theology is “to do whatever we can do that the life and message of the Gospel may be ever more incarnate in the rich historic cultures of Asia.”<sup>40</sup> This statement is a pledge made by the Asian bishops at the dawn of the FABC, at the 1970 Asian Bishops’ Meeting. Hence, the driving force behind these and similar statements is the fulfilment of the mission of the church in the most authentic way possible. This requires the church to be fully incarnated in any given culture: that is, that it be as local, as “Asian”, as possible. This aim led Asian bishops on a long journey in the course of which they were required to take up many challenges concerning Asian contexts. This, in turn, inevitably led them to wrestle with the questions of what the universality (catholicity) of the Church means in local contexts.

This chapter’s analysis so far has characterised the profound differences between Westernness and Asianness as an important framework for the FABC’s contextual theology. An impetus to become more Asian, Asian-ness, begun to emerge as an important and significant interpretative imperative with which the Asian bishops operate as they journey towards an Asian-compatible Catholic theology. In order to be able to reach a more comprehensive picture of the parameters of the FABC’s theology, the next section will examine other important aspects of an Asian worldview. There the focus will be on the themes of harmony, organic worldview and complementarity.

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<sup>40</sup> ABM 13, FAPA 1, 9.

## 2.2. Harmony as a Major Element of an Asian Worldview

### 2.2.1. Asian Harmony and the FABC

One cannot miss the centrality of ‘harmony’ when analysing the undergirding principles of the FABC’s theology. The word “harmony” appears hundreds of times in the FABC text corpus. This basic count already indicates that this notion is of primary importance for the FABC’s theology. In comparison, the concept of ‘harmony’ hardly occupies any significant place in western theological systems. Or, at least it does not seem to be constitutive of the mindsets and worldviews of western minds in the same measure as it does in the east.

In 1995, the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) took up the task of studying Asian Christian perspectives on harmony.<sup>41</sup> The necessity of studying this particular theme had appeared earlier as various FABC offices and seminars had come to realise the significance of the concept of harmony in Asian cultures and religions. The Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA) saw this necessity as they wrote: “Harmony seems to constitute in a certain sense the intellectual and affective, religious and artistic, personal and societal soul of both persons and institutions in Asia. Hence the imperative of a study in depth of the theology of harmony in the Asian context leading to interreligious dialogue appeared clear to us.”<sup>42</sup> Before that, and around the same time as the TAC made its own extensive theological in-depth analysis of Asian Christian perspectives on harmony, the BIRA arranged several sessions between Christians and representatives of other religions with the intention of discovering how a Christian perspective on harmony is similar to or different from the perspectives of other religions.<sup>43</sup>

Now we should ask why harmony is important as a framework for the FABC. It is obvious that Asian contextual theology as developed by the Asian bishops attempts to locate its underlying

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<sup>41</sup> TAC, FAPA 2, 229-298.

<sup>42</sup> BIRA IV/1 12 a., FAPA 1, 249.

<sup>43</sup> These sessions include: The 1992 Christian-Muslim Dialogue *Working Together for Harmony in God’s World* (BIRA V/1, FAPA 2, 143-147); Buddhists and Christians in Dialogue *A Call to Harmony* (1994 BIRA V/2, FAPA 2, 149-153); in 1995 A Hindu-Christian Dialogue *Working for Harmony in the Contemporary World* (BIRA V/3, FAPA 2, 155-160); and in 1996 *Taoist and Confucian Contributions to Harmony in East Asia* (BIRA V/4, FAPA 2, 161-165). Punda Panda (2001) wrote his doctoral dissertation on the viewpoint of interreligious dialogue under the title *Towards Living Together in Harmony*. Couple of chapters of his dissertation are related to these dialogues.

principles using Asian-compatible definitions and expressions. The attempts by the FABC to formulate theology within the framework of harmony clearly is one indicator of this. It is important to notice, however, that the FABC does not define harmony in precise terms; this fact is noted by the Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC: “Nowhere in FABC documents have we found an adequate well-articulated definition of harmony.”<sup>44</sup> Remarkably, this statement appears in the TAC’s 1995 study on harmony, after the conclusion of tens of pages of studying this very theme. Hence, it appears that this concept escapes precise definitions. Perhaps the concept itself, understood as an “Asian” term, is not capable of being pressed into very precise form.

What are possible reasons for this reluctance to define “harmony”? Perhaps it is because exact definitions would obviously run counter to the entire paradigm of an Asian worldview and theology, which avoid scientifically exact definitions of terms. “Rather than saying “A is true, so B must be false”, the Asian tends to say “A is true, and B is also true in some sense.”<sup>45</sup> So there seems to be here a certain kind of dilemma, or at least a significant challenge: Harmony as a central concept must be studied, but its exact meaning cannot be encapsulated in definite terms. Thus, an Asian approach is called for, or to put it another way, “Asianness” as a characterising framework surfaces here again.

In spite of the difficulty of finding precise, fixed definitions of the concept of harmony, the Formation Institute for Religious Affairs (FIRA)<sup>46</sup> provides descriptions of what this important Asian concept means. For the FIRA, this concept signifies a broad perspective on life which makes possible living in harmony with the cosmos, the others and the Divine.<sup>47</sup> The FIRA argues here that awareness of harmony is natural; it belongs to the Asian psyche, which also regards the Divine as something beyond personality. As such, it resonates well with the Asian psyche and vision of harmony.<sup>48</sup> The 1995 FIRA sessions build on what earlier BIRA meetings had suggested in writing that a harmonious life is also said to be multi-dimensional; it concerns one’s own self, personal

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<sup>44</sup> TAC 4.11., FAPA 2, 284.

<sup>45</sup> TAC Methodology, FAPA 3, 331.

<sup>46</sup> FIRA is the primary activity of the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA) of the FABC. FIRA was created after Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA) had held several series of sessions and realised that more attention needed be paid to the obstacles of dialogue. In addition,, instead of focusing solely on scholars and religious leaders, interreligious dialogue should be brought down to the grassroots. For that, formation of participants was viewed as important. For more on the history of BIRA and FIRA, see:

<http://www.fabc.org/offices/oeia/history.html>

<sup>47</sup> FIRA II, 3.2, FAPA 3, 127.

<sup>48</sup> FIRA II, 3.2., FAPA 3, 127.

integration of body and mind, the cosmos, other people and the Divine. Therefore, promotion of harmony ultimately concerns the well-being and peace of the whole universe and humankind.<sup>49</sup> This aspect of well-being and peace concerns not only living in harmony with nature but also sharing nature's gifts with others. In a similar manner, harmony presupposes an all-embracing and complementary way of thinking, a way of thinking which is also expressed in the term *yinyang*. This approach excludes an exclusivity which hinders seeing beauty and truth in others. Here, the emphasis is on the mutual belonging together of harmony and complementarity. Moreover, harmony includes harmony with God or the Absolute.<sup>50</sup> Finally, "[w]hat gives ultimate meaning to life is the spiritual pilgrimage in pursuit of Truth, Harmony, the Divine."<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, as emphasised by the sixth Plenary Assembly of the FABC in 1995, an Asian vision of life consists of integrity, dignity and compassion for others, especially for the poor and needy. This vision of life belongs together with the sense of mystery and sacred which finds the Transcendent even in everyday 'worldly' affairs, "in tragedy or victory, in brokenness or wholeness."<sup>52</sup> Harmony and inner peace can be experienced in all these. Therefore, it is no wonder that the FABC sought to develop and create a theology from the perspective of harmony.<sup>53</sup>

However, harmony does not abolish pluralism. Actually, the reverse is the case: in the FABC's thought as delineated by BIRA, harmony is 'harmonious' with pluralism. One can see this rich pluralism in nature and human society. Even more, reality itself is pluralistic: this pluralism can be observed among the differences between cultures and religions. Despite these differences, all religions have in common a search for wholeness and unity. Everything that exists is united in an organic whole which brings and binds together the whole pluralistic reality.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, the Theological Advisory Commission argues in clear terms that harmony is compatible with Asia's organic worldview. Although the notion of harmony cannot perhaps be defined in clear terms, the TAC theologians contend: "To define harmony at this point is to run counter to the Asian way of theologising. However, it may be helpful to realise that the Asian search for harmony

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<sup>49</sup>Three dimensions of harmony are mentioned in: BIRA IV/11, FAPA 1, 322. The fourth dimension of harmony, "harmony in oneself as personal integration of body and mind", is in BIRA V/2, 3.2., FAPA 2, 151.

<sup>50</sup> BIRA V/2, 3.2. FAPA 2, 151.

<sup>51</sup> FEISA 7.1.1., FAPA 2, 59.

<sup>52</sup> FABC 6, 10, FAPA 2, 5.

<sup>53</sup> BIRA VI/1, FAPA 2, 144. BIRA's wish to create a theology of harmony was at least partially fulfilled by the OTC when in 1995 the Office produced the document *Asian Christian Perspectives of Harmony*.

<sup>54</sup> BIRA V/3 1. FAPA 2, 155.

proceeds from a world-view that is organic, interactive and cosmic.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the entire Asian understanding of reality is argued to be organic; relationships make up the whole, the unity, where all parts are related to each other.<sup>56</sup> In this context, the bishops note that, especially since the fifth Plenary Assembly of FABC in 1990, the orientation of the theology of the FABC has been geared towards reflection, which is based on harmony within Asia’s organic worldview.<sup>57</sup> Hence, it appears that the significance of harmony as a characterising framework for the Federation’s theology has come to be more clearly articulated over the years.

At this point it can safely be assumed that the reason why the term “harmony” occupies such a central position in the FABC’s contextual theology is not one of merely choosing a term with a slightly more “Asian” flavour. It is rather the core question which concerns the Asian worldview as understood by the FABC. The Asian bishops are not alone in identifying harmony as perhaps the most significant parameter, or as an overriding value, of an Asian worldview<sup>58</sup>. Others also claim that harmony is the fundamental category of Asian theology.<sup>59</sup>

In the opinion of the Office for Theological Concerns (OTC) of the FABC, their own approach is compatible with an Asian philosophical and religious understanding complementarity in which a

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<sup>55</sup> TAC, FAPA 2, 232.

<sup>56</sup> TAC 3.4., FAPA 2, 276.

<sup>57</sup> TAC 4.1, FAPA 2, 277.

<sup>58</sup> “Given the overriding value of harmony, Asian Christians will be looking for the ways to integrate the experiences of Asia, the experience of their own forebears and hence of their own psyche, into their Christian faith. The Asian way is one of integration and inclusion.” TAC Methodology, FAPA 3, 331.

Tran Van Doan categorises Asian ethics and theology in the framework of harmony in his article “*Harmony as a Category of Asian Ethics and Theology*” (2009). Tran first asserts that an attempt to find a common ground between Christianity and Asian religions will result in more contrasts than similarities. He presents seven possible differences, all of which indicate dissimilarities between east and west. These are: (1) God cannot be an object of our knowledge and research. Knowing God in a scientific manner is impossible. God should be explained in an existential way instead of scientifically. This latter manner is represented in Asian religions and philosophies. (2) Asian theologies are concerned with gods, but generally only in the context of life and human affairs. Gods are worshipped as supporters, not creators of life. (3) Practical life is primary. People seek longevity, happiness and freedom from suffering, and in this search people turn to gods and deities. Thus, in theology practice comes before theory. (4) “The gods do not play a direct role in human life by deciding human fate the way some understandings of the Judaic or Christian God does. The gods do not intervene in human affairs unless specifically asked to.” (5) Human life is sustained with the help of nature. Nature is not created, but rather co-existent with gods. Constitutive, dynamic forces of life are gods, nature and the human being. (6) “Attitudes toward nature do not express human perception, but rather an ontological understanding of nature; the existence of nature is inseparable from human existence.”

(7) In practical life, followers of Asian religions seek self-cultivation for the sake of oneself, one’s family, nation and all human beings. (Tran 2009, 46-49).

<sup>59</sup> Tran 2009, 63. He analyses the concept especially in the context of Chinese philosophy and religion. There harmony is seen as the uniting force, the law (law of equilibrium), the end and the means. Tran also thinks that harmony is a necessary element of life: “In a word, birth-giving, life-preserving, and life-fostering can be possible only by means of harmony and in harmony.” Tran 2009, 54.

harmonious and inclusive approach are preferred: “For the promotion of harmony, it is important to cultivate an all-embracing and complementary way of thinking. This is something very characteristic of Asian traditions which consider the various dimensions of reality not as contradictory, but as complementary (*yinyang*).”<sup>60</sup>

The reasons why the FABC also attempts to present its theological vision within the framework of the concept of harmony now become clearer. Harmony constitutes a general Asian framework into which the FABC intends to create its Asian compatible contextual theology. But what do the FABC theologians and bishops intend to do with this important concept especially with regard to presenting the Gospel in a manner compatible with the Asian context?

### **2.2.2. The Core of the Christian Message within the Framework of Harmony**

Because harmony occupies a central position within an Asian worldview, mindsets and philosophies<sup>61</sup>, it is no wonder that a theology of harmony occupies such an important place in the

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<sup>60</sup> OTC, Methodology 1.4., FAPA 3, 336-337. Tran elaborates the meaning of *yin* and *yang*: “In this category there is also an idea of the world being the union of opposite elements, the *Yin* and the *Yang*. It is important to note that the opposite elements in this philosophy are not contradictory elements. They are disparate and different but they are oriented towards union because their nature and essence *in se* is intended for union, and again *in se* they are incomplete and will be completed only by the complementation of other elements. But the complementation, the union, can only occur if all concerned partners are harmonious. “Harmony here requires the conditions of (1) all concerned subjects possessing the same purpose (of birth-giving) and are active toward such purpose, (2) they are different but complementary. (3) The act of complementing means the act of giving part of the self to other (who needs it), and only by it that the receiver can be “completed,” “fulfilled,” i.e., “realized.” (4) The fulfillment of two involved subjects bears fruit, i.e., the new life.” (Tran 2009, 55). The FABC’s emphasis on ‘Asianness’ takes place for the most part in Asian cultures influenced by Chinese religions, Hinduism and Buddhism. Islamic cultures receive less attention, although a couple dialogue sessions between FABC theologians and Muslims have taken place. Also the Office for Theological Concerns (OTC) in its attempt to develop Asian theological methodology devotes several pages for Islam.

<sup>61</sup> Tran (2009, 55) postulates that “harmony is an essential part of human nature and cosmic nature” and that “harmony must be the essence or the nature of any living thing (human or cosmic life).” He continues by asserting that union is natural and universal for all living things which must follow this order so that they can preserve, prolong and grow their lives. This same order of union also concerns the spiritual and cultural life. It can, for example, create a rich culture which consists of different traditions, cultures and beliefs. A culture cannot survive without this harmonious and complementary union. But in this way a rich culture through the union of different but related and mutually complementary elements can come to birth. (Tran 2009, 55-56). The almost all-interpretative and all-constitutive function of harmony can be seen here: “Human life (and cosmic life) can be expressed in terms of harmony, namely as its form. In Chinese philosophy, harmony is both the means and ends of life. As the means, harmony is expressed in the form of union, fusion and synthesis among others; it is the most universal and necessary of principles.” (Tran 2009, 57). Therefore, in Chinese philosophy harmony is not merely a characteristic of nature but actually is its essence. In this framework, according to Tran, religion and theology are expressions of cosmic self-manifestation and transcendent life. They rely on nature and are essential characteristics of nature. They can even be considered as natural laws and natural orders. Therefore, in these natural laws there is an inherent orientation towards union and harmony. Hence, according to the Asian (Chinese) worldview, seeking harmony and union does not presuppose divine



theology of the Asian Catholic bishops. It is certainly one way of introducing the Christian faith into Asia by means of attempting to prove that there is nothing inherently contradictory in the core of Christian faith with regard to Asian worldviews and categories.

The TAC ventures so far as to describe the whole of biblical salvation history within the framework of harmony. Here, harmony is understood as the original status of God's creation before the Fall. The TAC defines sin as disruption of harmony. Jesus Christ is presented as the person of harmony who came to restore broken harmony. Then, the biblical term "recapitulation" is described as "final harmony".<sup>62</sup> In the TAC's opinion, "Biblical revelation, in many aspects, is congenial to Asian cultural thought patterns and approaches."<sup>63</sup> However, the Judeo-Christian tradition, despite being an Asian religious tradition, has been predominantly determined by western cultural patterns in the past.<sup>64</sup> Thus, "[t]he formulation of an Asian theology of harmony necessarily calls for a re-reading of the biblical data on harmony from an Asian perspective."<sup>65</sup> The TAC's call includes the following phases: "Original harmony in creation"<sup>66</sup>, "disharmony caused by sin"<sup>67</sup>, "the process from disharmony to harmony"<sup>68</sup>, "fulfilment of the promised harmony in Christ, which initiated the reign of God and ushered a better harmony among people and in the cosmos".<sup>69</sup> The TAC concludes its call with the themes of reconciliation and recapitulation in Christ. Here the TAC draw their biblical references primarily from the Pauline letters.<sup>70</sup> As the FABC theologians continue their discussion, they note that the term 'harmony' does not appear in the Bible. The biblical term which comes closest to it is the Hebrew *shalom* (peace). Hence, harmony seems to be a kind of

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help from outside the existing order, or cosmos. Harmony is the dynamic force which orders all elements and thus constitutes the first law of nature. Harmony is then the way of nature and principle of life. (Tran 2009, 52-61.)

<sup>62</sup> TAC 3.3.-3.4, FAPA 2, 266-277.

<sup>63</sup> TAC 3.3., FAPA 2, 266.

<sup>64</sup> TAC 3.3., FAPA 2, 266.

<sup>65</sup> TAC 3.3., FAPA 2, 266.

<sup>66</sup> TAC 3.3.1, FAPA 2, 266. Here two images of harmony appear: God created the world in full harmony, in a hierarchy of values and relationship of complementarity. In this picture, the human being serves as the steward of God for the harmony of the universe. The second aspect is mutual trust and harmony between man and woman.

<sup>67</sup> TAC 3.3.1.1, FAPA 2, 267. The sin of the first human beings introduced disharmony into the creation. It dominates the relationship between man and woman, between brothers (Cain and Abel) and between wo/man and her/his fellow human beings.

<sup>68</sup> TAC 3.3.1.2., FAPA 2, 267-268. Here God's plan to restore harmony is said to begin "at the very moment when disharmony was introduced into the world of God's creation (Gen. 3:14-15)." (TAC 3.3.1.2, FAPA 2, 267). This restoration continues through to God's promise after the flood, the covenant with Noah and the linking together of the tower of Babel (disharmony) and the restored harmony made manifest in Pentecost.

<sup>69</sup> TAC 3.3.2-3.3.2.2., FAPA 2, 268-270. The harmony brought by Jesus is also present in his preaching of the Good News, exorcisms of Satan and healing of the sick and pardoning of sins. The paschal events of Jesus especially brought harmony close. Christ is also depicted as the suffering servant of harmony. His cross is the glory of the Suffering Servant and the power for establishing harmony among humankind.

<sup>70</sup> TAC 3.3.2.3., FAPA 2, 271-272. The cross of Christ broke down the dividing wall between people and made them one. In the end Christ will subdue the cosmic powers and everyone on earth and will bring them under his rule.

hypernym or blanket term for *shalom* and the following other terms that represent different aspects of harmony: “covenant” (*berith*), “justice” (*sedaka*), “blessing” (*beraka*), “reconciliation” (*kataallage*) and “communion” (*koinonia*).<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, the BIRA documents contain more scriptural foundations for the concept of harmony. The following appear in the documents: Creation, Covenant, People of God, and Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is said to embody the three other foundations.<sup>72</sup> Then, the sixth Plenary Assembly of the FABC depicts Jesus as the bringer of harmony.<sup>73</sup>

These aforementioned definitions reveal the clear intention of the Asian bishops to construct an Asian contextual theology on a Scriptural basis. However, it appears that in this effort, biblical material compatible with an Asian worldview and mindset was deliberately chosen. This practice represents a re-reading of the biblical texts from an Asian perspective. Here the overriding interpretative principle is harmony, which balances between Asianness and biblical revelation, and between the universal and the local interpretation of the Gospel while attempting to keep them in balance with each other. This means that harmony is both the end result of this reading and also a means to the end; biblical and other theological materials are read “harmoniously.” Reading biblical material leads to interpretation, and here the Asian bishops interpret certain texts within an Asian framework as understood by the FABC. Asianness, and Asian contexts, contribute to the understanding of the texts.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> TAC 3.3., FAPA 2, 266. TAC 3.3.2.4. writes in FAPA 2, 272: “The biblical concept of peace [*shalom*] is the one that is closest to harmony...basically, it denotes always wholeness, health and completeness.”

<sup>72</sup> BIRA IV/10, 6. FAPA 1, 314.

<sup>73</sup> “This image of Jesus -- man of the creative Spirit, friend of God, person of interiority, bringer of harmony, lover of the poor, healer and liberator, bold prophet, suffering companion, victor over death, sharer of his Spirit -- resonates with the Asian peoples' vision of life.” FABC 6, 13.5. FAPA 2, 7.

<sup>74</sup> Lee 2008, 179-203, discusses cross-textual hermeneutics and identity in multi-religious Asia. Lee posits that the presence of various religions and their respective scriptures present a problem and challenge to the reading of the Bible in Asia. “Asian Christian converts ...could not afford to ignore the reality of the plurality of texts.” (Lee 2008, 179). Lee then follows the classification of R. S. Sugirtharajah by introducing three different models of relating the Bible to Asian cultures and religions. The first is called the “Anglicist” mode, which attempts to “replace the indigenous texts by integrating the colonized into the culture of the colonizer and, ... import the Enlightenment and the modernist conviction of grand-narrative as well as western reading techniques of historical criticism in order to ascertain the single objective meaning of the Christian Bible.” (Lee 2008, 180). The second model is called the “Orientalist” mode which aims at reviving the native texts and views local history and civilization as a preparation for biblical, Christian faith. Lee argues that both of these two models neglect the rich and elaborate indigenous religions and have done harm to a holistic understanding of indigenous cultures. (Lee especially mentions China). The third model of approach the Bible and Asian scriptures is called the “nativist interpretation”: Its aim is to recover vernacular forms of texts and traditions. Lee comments that this interpretation has something valuable in it, but it however has an inherent tendency to idealise the indigenous tradition viewing “it as a pure, static and uncontaminated entity.” (Lee 2008, 181). Lee assesses all these abovementioned approaches inadequate and proposes a cross-textual biblical interpretation as an appropriate model to accommodate the Bible and Asian scriptures. Lee summarises: “Asian

Hence, the FABC sees harmony as a major feature in both Asian cultures and in God's original creation and its restoration. In the FABC's exposition, harmony safeguards the Asianness of theology but does not contradict the core of the biblical revelation. It serves as a major accommodating principle through which the FABC wishes to inculturate the Gospel in Asia. As noted earlier, this strategy is not without uncertainties and risks.<sup>75</sup> Thus, the question arises: does the FABC manage to maintain a balance between the universal and the local understanding and interpretation of the biblical texts? The strong emphasis placed on this notion of harmony suggests at least that the Asian bishops have put much effort into discerning ways of interpreting the Christian faith in the Asian context, that is, in an Asian way: - harmoniously. This means that the church in Asia must become local, which implies harmony and complementarity. Moreover, in the opinion of the Asian bishops, it is obvious that the "Asian" (local) does not exclude the universal. Thus, these two dimensions can coexist in an Asian harmony.

In defining harmony as a major theme of Christianity and arguing that the term expresses the sum total of salvation offered by God through Jesus Christ<sup>76</sup>, the FABC implies that God and God's salvation are not in conflict with human beings and their capacities. Rather, as elaborated by the BIRA, in its reference to transcendental anthropology of contemporary theologians, God is the *natural* fulfilment of human beings.<sup>77</sup> Human beings can respond to God's love; God has created human beings in God's own image; therefore they are capable of sharing in God's own life. Thus, the capacity lies within the created human condition to acknowledge the Transcendent and Infinite and move towards that goal. The term 'transcendental anthropology' resembles the theology of Karl Rahner, in whose theology the move towards transcendence is available to all of humanity; human

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Christians have been caught in the situation of having both the native scriptures (Text A) and a newly acquired biblical text (Text B), with great pressure from the Christian community to denounce the former. They have to find ways to resolve the claims of the two texts which respect their loyalty as well as their identity." (Lee 2008, 182)

<sup>75</sup> OTC, Methodology, FAPA 3, 331. Another indicator of the Asian approach of the FABC is here: "Since doing the truth comes before formulation of doctrine, the Churches in Asia should not wait a satisfactory theological answer before going further in praxis of dialogue and proclamation. It is in this systematic reflection on sustained praxis that we discover what God is saying to the Churches." OE, Conclusions of the Theological Consultation 53, FAPA 2, 205.

<sup>76</sup> BIRA V/4 5. FAPA 2, 164.

<sup>77</sup> BIRA V/4, 5. FAPA 2, 164. (Emphasis added.) "It is often thought that a personal God would be in conflict with human persons. A God with free will who is all powerful would exercise oppressive control over humans. This is not the case. The transcendental anthropology of contemporary theologians points out that, far from being oppressive, God is the natural fulfilment of humans. The Christian God is a loving God who created human beings in God's image and destined them to share God's own life in free response." BIRA V/4, 5, FAPA 2, 164.

beings only need to make the active choice to accept grace. “Hence it [accepting grace] is at once part of our very being (it is ‘existential’) and yet takes us beyond the limits of our nature (it is ‘supernatural’).”<sup>78</sup> In the sentence quoted above, harmony is a key term: indeed, one BIRA session suggests ‘harmony’ and a harmonious relationship with the personal God as a Christian contribution to harmony in East Asia.<sup>79</sup>

Since God seems to be within reach of human capacity, a capacity based on the createdness of human beings, and since harmony expresses the core of salvation of God in Jesus Christ, what then is the special, additional contribution of the Christian faith to the already-present harmony inscribed in Asian cultures and religions? Perhaps the most crucial question is: what of substance does Jesus Christ bring into the harmony already present in Asian contexts? The first clue appears when the BIRA writes that Jesus Christ is God’s gift “to the world so that all men and women might become

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<sup>78</sup> Archer 2011, 5. Archer discusses Rahner’s concept *Vorgriff*, (pre-apprehension), a priori power given with human nature. Thus, the human being, based on his or her natural condition, is potentially oriented towards the infinite. This step towards the infinite and transcendence takes us beyond the limits of the nature. Thus, it is supernatural. Here a possible question arises: if human beings, in possession of the *Vorgriff*, are capable of taking a step towards transcendence, what is the place of the revelation in Christ? In Archer’s analysis of Rahner, the answer is in the incarnation, in which God has been made something as categorical as we human beings are. In the incarnate Logos, God allows himself to be present in his own world. This makes possible the “downwardness of God’s self-emptying and the upwardness of human rise to transcendence.” (Archer 2011, 11.) This makes way for Rahner’s transcendental anthropology, by which we can approach the mystery of God. “This anthropology both draws us into the transcendent and binds all the individual members of the human species into communion with it.” (Archer 2011, 13) ‘Rahnerian’ terms and Rahner’s theology are apparently useful tools for the FABC in its attempt to ‘make space’ for God and the Christian revelation in Asian contexts. Rahner’s concepts and framework provide tools and categories for accommodating Gospel to Asia. However, it cannot be concluded that FABC’s theology consciously follows Rahner’s theology in all aspects. The contexts of Rahner and of the Asian bishops are different, and Asian bishops obviously see Asianness as a major category in which Rahner’s inclusivist Christology is helpful. Nonetheless, both in Rahner and in the FABC’s theology, the incarnation establishes a special relationship between God and us. In and through the incarnation God enters into God’s own world. Also, it should be noted that as a *peritus* of the Second Vatican Council, Rahner played a significant role in preparing of conciliar documents. Vorgrimler (1986, 100) argues that it is not difficult to trace Rahner’s influence on the work of the Council and its documents, perhaps with the exception of the *Decree On the Means of Social Communication*, the *Decree On the Catholic Eastern Churches*, the *Declaration on Christian education*, and the *Declaration on Religious Liberty*.

The FABC’s theology as reception and application of the Vatican II certainly carries with it a certain “rahnerian” taste. Bevans (2009, 303-310) briefly and clearly introduces the significant developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s Catholic theology. He argues that Rahner, together with Bernard Lonergan, are the two most important representatives of Transcendental Thomism in this period. Bevans mentions Henri de Lubac developed this school of thought before Rahner and Lonergan. De Lubac argues that the common distinction between natural and supernatural, between nature and grace, is false, and not really a part of theology of Thomas Aquinas. The implications of this thought are substantial. They point to the graced nature of human culture and to the possibility of salvation even without explicit knowledge of or faith in Christ. Bevans posits that many of Rahner’s ideas (e.g. the holiness of the everyday, the universal reality of grace) are basic for constructing contextual theologies in local cultures and situations today. On the relationship between nature and grace in Catholic theology, see also Kraus 2000, 504-506.

<sup>79</sup> BIRA VI/4, 5. Here the context is the dialogue with Taoists and Confucians. This context also explains the geographical restriction to East Asia. The main agenda of the dialogue was contributions to harmony from the participating representatives of the abovementioned three religions.

God's children by participating in Jesus' filial relationship with God."<sup>80</sup> By giving Jesus Christ to the world God proves God's immense love for humankind<sup>81</sup>; this is the very same love which God showed when he created human beings in God's own image. The Incarnation affirms this love and makes it possible for human beings to become God's children and to participate in Jesus' filial relationship with God. This filial relationship concerns not only the relationship between God and human beings but also makes human beings brothers and sisters to one another.<sup>82</sup>

In a similar manner, and in clear terms, the 1991 Theological Consultation arranged by the Office of Evangelization (OE) of the FABC affirms that Jesus Christ is the centre of faith. Jesus is the climax of "God's age-long self-manifestations". The Incarnation of Jesus Christ also means God's personal entrance into human history and his becoming a member of the human race. Through the incarnation, Jesus Christ totally identified with human beings and shared with us the Sonship of the Father. The paschal mystery<sup>83</sup> of Jesus' death, resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit culminates his God's manifestation and begins the renewal of creation and the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth.<sup>84</sup>

In the point above, the horizon of interpreting the incarnation is clearly broadened. The incarnation is not merely the actual being born into flesh of Jesus but it extends to the entire paschal mystery.<sup>85</sup> Christ remains at the centre; his Paschal mystery affects the renewal of creation and also has cosmic implications. The paschal mystery is the summit and culmination of the Christ event, and it opens up the cosmic dimensions of God's universal plan for the salvation of the entire creation. This

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<sup>80</sup> BIRA V/4 5, FAPA 2, 164. BIRA V/4 was a dialogue session with Taoists and Confucians. This may be a reason for describing the relationships between Jesus and God with the term 'filial'. In Jesus Christ men and women are taken into this filial relationship which also implies relationship with other people as brothers and sisters. God gave Jesus to the world to prove his love. Christ then becomes the example of love of God and love of neighbours. Christ is also the source of harmony between God and humans.

<sup>81</sup> BIRA V/45, FAPA 2, 164.

<sup>82</sup> BIRA V/45, FAPA 2, 164.

<sup>83</sup> The FABC documents spell the term "paschal mystery" in various ways. At some points both words are capitalised, whereas at some other points either or both words are written in small letters.

<sup>84</sup> "Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, is at the centre of our faith. In Him, God's age-long self-manifestation through human history has come to a climax. In Jesus God has personally entered human history and become a member of the human race. This total identification with us of the son of God is ordained to sharing with us his Sonship of the Father. Jesus accomplished this mission throughout his earthly life, and singularly through the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The paschal mystery in which the Christ-event culminates thus ushers in the renewal of creation and marks the decisive step in the establishment of his Kingdom on earth. It has cosmic implications and universal significance." OE, Theological Consultation 28, FAPA 2, 199.

<sup>85</sup> The same idea is suggested by Shorter (1999, 82-83) who posits that the emphasis in inculturation should be moved from simply the incarnation into the whole Paschal mystery.

strong, trans-historical emphasis on the cosmic dimensions of the Christ-event is probably best understood as the FABC's attempt to take account of the underpinnings of an Asian worldview and mindset. This line of thought is further affirmed when the OTC discusses the kinds of perspectives which are included in a vision of Asian Christian harmony. The Christian revelation needs to be reread from the perspective of Christ, who came to fulfil Father's plan to reconcile, restore and recapitulate in himself the entire universe. The Church then must be at service of this plan and understand itself as a centrifugal church whose mission concerns the whole universe. In this kind of Church, and Christian revelation interpreted in this way, revelation is compatible with an approach based on harmony and as such also with Asia. Combined with harmony, God's age-long plan realised and fulfilled in the Christ event is compatible with the concept of harmony and even ushers in a better-understood and better-realised harmony.

In the above texts, the FABC appears to rely on a fulfilment paradigm as they discuss the Christian revelation, and especially the role of Jesus Christ in bringing about this fulfilment. However, the FABC's understanding of fulfilment in Christ is convergent with the core characteristics of being Asian, especially that of harmony. In this paradigm, Jesus Christ enters the world and human history. His ministry is primarily one of restoration of the primordial harmony. He is the proof of God's plan and love. But the parameters of an Asian worldview and mindsets compel the bishops to present Jesus in Asia in 'an Asian way', in an integral, inclusive and harmonious way. Moreover, the Church in Asia cannot put on the face of a powerful institution. That was the face of the colonisers, and the vestiges of that era still linger in Asia. Many regard Christianity as a white man's religion and, as such, foreign. In this situation, where the Church is in minority position almost everywhere in Asia, the bishops acknowledge that the Church in Asia is a 'little flock'<sup>86</sup> (*pusillus grex*) which in its mission needs to present its message in a humble way to others. The Church is named as a servant Church, which "is not afraid of being a minority"<sup>87</sup> who "does not place herself at the centre."<sup>88</sup> In addition, when the Office of Theological Advisory Commission develops Asian Christian perspectives on harmony, the Commission, following the cue of Vatican II, defines the Church as "the servant sacrament of harmony."<sup>89</sup> However, in this same context the

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<sup>86</sup> FAPA 1, 101; FAPA 1, 282; FAPA 2, 9; FAPA 2, 221. In addition, being a "little flock" compels the community of Christians to recognise other people, regardless of their faith-convictions, as fellow wayfarers to God's Reign with whom Christians should seek harmony, justice, peace and the integrity of creation. OTC 4.11.5-6-, FAPA 3, 285-286. The bishops also find courage in the words of Christ: Fear not, little flock (Lk. 12:32), OTC 4.11.6., FAPA 3, 285.

<sup>87</sup> OE, Theological Consultation 25, FAPA 2, 199.

<sup>88</sup> OE, Theological Consultation 25, FAPA 2, 199.

<sup>89</sup> TAC 5.2.6., FAPA 2, 295. *Gaudium et spes* in particular characterises the church as the sign and sacrament of unity. Here, the FABC adds some dimensions to these characterisations.

TAC posits that there are still some disharmonious and conflictual elements that are traces and vestiges from the past. The TAC views them as hindrances for the successful mission of the Church in Asia. These obstacles, they argue, need to be resolved by harmonious means, with the attitude of a humble servant, and with the understanding of the Church as the servant-sacrament of harmony.<sup>90</sup>

In this attitude of being a humble servant and within the framework of harmony the Church considers the adherents of other faith-convictions and cultures no longer as contenders or opponents but rather as fellow wayfarers to the Kingdom of God. With this attitude the TAC writes: “It is through a triple dialogue with cultures, with religions and with the poor (FABC I), through a mutually-enriching interchange in its various modes and at various levels, not the least in the dialogue of life with people of other faiths and religious traditions, that Asian Christianity is to strive for human and cosmic harmony in Jesus Christ.”<sup>91</sup>

We have now analysed various dimensions of the concept of harmony as it is discussed in the FABC documents. It seems to be clear that, as a major undergirding principle both in the Asian psyche and soul as well as in Asian cultures, philosophies and religions, and as the core theme of the whole Christian revelation as interpreted in an Asian manner, harmony represents a common ground between Asia and the Christian message. Harmony is the origin and the consummation of the Biblical revelation. Harmony as the origin and destination is also inscribed in Asian cultures and religions. The Gospel’s contribution in Asia is to proclaim that Jesus is “the unique Saviour of the world, the One who beyond human dreams fulfils the deepest yearnings of the Asian heart.”<sup>92</sup> It is also true that the Good News about Jesus is the Church’s most precious gift to Asia.<sup>93</sup> At the same time, this uniqueness and Good News interpreted in the framework of harmony actually bespeak of an original goodness and harmony perennially present in and through Asian religions and philosophies. In this respect, Jesus and the gospel affirm and intensify what is already present in Asia. Jesus is no stranger in Asia. This aspect is also a call for the Asian Church to present Jesus in this harmonious shape and thus become a servant and sign of this perennial harmony. Perhaps this harmony is opaque, even obscure, in Asia; but it is thus also in theology and the current practices of

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<sup>90</sup> TAC 5.2.6., FAPA 2, 295.

<sup>91</sup> TAC 4.11.6. FAPA 2, 285-286.

<sup>92</sup> OE Symposium of Evangelization 4, FAPA 4, 250. Also Consultation on “Evangelization and Inculturation, FAPA 3, 216, speaks about sharing the gift of faith in Jesus as the only Saviour. These kinds of explicit expressions about the uniqueness of Jesus as the only Saviour are quite rare in the FABC documents.

<sup>93</sup> OE Symposium on Evangelization 4, FAPA 4, 250.

the Church. Hence, a call for conversion to original harmony is addressed both to the Church and to all Asia. Christ and his gospel are a ‘meeting place’ for them both.

Thus, harmony is a salient term by means of which the Asian bishops seek to show that the Christian faith at its core is very Asian and compatible with the essentials of being Asian. It also seems that in the FABC’s theology, Christian faith contains nothing inherently contradictory to “Asian harmony.” However, perfect harmony is not always actualised in the real-life contexts of Asia: there are conflictual situations in Asia. Nevertheless, harmony is inscribed at the core of Asian philosophies and religions. This essence, this core, is also explicable in the framework of Christian revelation as the original status of the created cosmos and as its final fulfilment.

### **2.2.3. Christian Harmony and Being Asian**

Besides its being at the core of ‘being Asian’, in the thought of the FABC harmony originates in God the Creator, and human harmony flows from the communion between the Persons of the Trinity. Consequently, harmony is never the result of merely human achievements. The personal God is the source of this harmony. Specifically Christian faith, then, reveals the “divinely transcendent and immanent, metahistorical dimension of harmony.”<sup>94</sup> Here the TAC discusses the concept of harmony within the soteriological framework of recapitulation in Jesus Christ. This discussion actually concludes the TAC’s treatise on the biblical-historical orientation of harmony. The Cosmic Christ is presented as the head under whom everything in the heavens and earth will be brought together. This Christ continues his mission of breaking down barriers, creating harmonious unity and restoring peace and harmony with God and between human beings. The Church has been called to be a sign of this union.<sup>95</sup> Here the TAC’s exposition shows how they make use of Paul’s concept of recapitulation in Christ. This indicates that the framework of Asian thinking can be included in the salvation historical approach. The biblical idea of meta- and transhistorical fulfilment in Christ does not exclude the overriding Asian principle of harmony. It only discloses the origin and the supreme fulfilment of harmony. This is the TAC’s Christian contribution to the understanding of harmony in Asia. The FABC is not content with a general Asian characterisation of harmony; the Christian message is needed, but the bishops’ intention is to introduce it in a harmonious manner which is more compatible with the Asian approach.

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<sup>94</sup> TAC 4.11.1, FAPA 2, 284.

<sup>95</sup> TAC 4.11.5, FAPA 2, 285.



Elsewhere in the same document the TAC affirms that “a theology of harmony cannot be formed solely within the categories of a traditional Christian theology, by reading Christian revelation and applying its principles to the conflictual situations.”<sup>96</sup> Here, again, one can detect a certain tension as the FABC seeks to balance between the Christian revelation and its contextual applications. In the discussion of harmony in subsection above, we noted that the TAC presents biblical salvation history in the framework of harmony, while at the same time with the intention to preserve the authentic Christian revelation of the Cosmic Christ and recapitulation of all in him. Nevertheless, the context always needs to be taken into account, thus, “a theology of harmony in Asia can only be a contextual theology.”<sup>97</sup> Here the TAC especially has in mind conflictual situations, but the principle is applicable in all contextual situations. Thus, a theology of harmony will also consist of reading and reflecting on contextual realities together with “religious and cultural revelations”.<sup>98</sup> It appears that harmony can be learned from Christian and other perspectives. The aim is a better understanding of harmony. In this particular question the best results will be gained by the interplay of different sources of theology: the Christian revelation and Asian contexts.

In addition to the concept of harmony, the FABC supplements its definition of an Asian worldview by describing it as complementary and organic. Both of these notions are often paired with harmony. In its discussion of inculturation, the statement of the second plenary assembly notes that Asian bishops are convinced that their goal should be an organic integration of Christian heritage and Asian traditional, cultural and religious elements.<sup>99</sup> Here the context of the bishops’ discussion is prayer, in which the bishops argue that Christian prayer and Asian prayer can contribute much to each other. Furthermore, they posit that harmony actually proceeds from a worldview which is organic, interactive and cosmic.<sup>100</sup> In the same text, the TAC contends that harmony should be reflected within Asia’s organic worldview.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, the TAC concludes their treatise on Asian Christian perspectives on harmony by saying:

It is clear that there is an Asian approach to reality, an Asian understanding of reality that is profoundly organic, i.e., a world-view wherein the whole, the unity, is the sum-total of the web of relationships, and interaction of the various parts with each other. There is no part which is not in relation to all other parts; and all the parts together make the whole. The parts are understood in terms of their mutual

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<sup>96</sup> TAC 5.2., FAPA 2, 291-292.

<sup>97</sup> TAC 5.2., FAPA 2, 292.

<sup>98</sup> TAC 5.2., FAPA 2, 292.

<sup>99</sup> FABC 2, 31, FAPA 1, 35.

<sup>100</sup> TAC, Introduction, FAPA 2, 232.

<sup>101</sup> TAC, 4.1., FAPA 2, 277. Here the particular place for theological reflection is identified as interreligious dialogue.

dependence. Our efforts to resolve disharmony and promote wholeness of life need to draw from our Asian cultural and religious resources which will resonate with our people and speak to them more effectively.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, a harmonious, contextual Asian theology must necessarily be built on this Asian, organic approach to reality. The key terms here are relationships, interaction and mutual dependence. This understanding and approach are also imperative for the Church's mission in Asia. An Asian Church, the TAC argues, ought to be built upon these characteristics. These assertions help in understanding the FABC's strong emphasis on being Asian and Asian-ness.

The seventh Plenary Assembly of the FABC writes: "This "being Asian" is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony."<sup>103</sup> In this process of becoming Asian and being Asian, Asian religious and cultural resources are accepted as material for theology, but the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) adds a word of caution; there may be historically conditioned elements in Asian cultural and religious resources which are in need of purification.<sup>104</sup> Here the OTC does not, however, articulate the criteria for assessing these elements and what kind of purification would be expected.

One can safely state that the TAC's nearly 70-page-long treatise on Asian Christian perspectives on harmony is certainly one of the main theological documents produced by the FABC. Its length also shows that it is the product of a long and careful study of the topic. This is also evident in the work done in the phases before the writing of the document; the need for this kind of study was expressed many years before its publication. Therefore, towards the end of this document on Asian Christian perspectives on harmony the TAC states with confidence that the FABC's "theological vision is becoming more and more based on an organic view of the world."<sup>105</sup> As was analysed earlier, in the view of the FABC an organic view and approach to the world seems to best correspond and respond to the Asian situation.

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<sup>102</sup>T AC 3.4., FAPA 2, 276.

<sup>103</sup> FABC 7, III, FAPA 3, 9. Here FABC's 7th Plenary Assembly quotes *verbatim* from chapter 6 Pope John Paul II's post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA). The passage of EA cited by the FABC reads in full: "The innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul, and it is the core around which a growing sense of "being Asian" is built. This "being Asian" is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the Gospel in a way which is faithful both to her own Tradition and to the Asian soul." Interestingly, the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) in their year 2011 reiterates the same principle and quotes the same EA text. OTC, FABC Papers 133, 44.

<sup>104</sup> OTC, FABC Papers 133, 44.

<sup>105</sup> TAC 5.2.1., FAPA 2, 293.

Regarding the FABC's views concerning the issue of "being Asian" and "Asianness" as parameters and a framework for an Asian-compatible Asian theology, our analysis this far has shown that the Asian bishops' Asian theology can be interpreted and understood as an emerging process in which earlier, western interpretations and forms of the gospel and Church have proven to be too foreign. Asia calls for a more harmonious, complementary and organic approach. These important parameters necessarily affect how the Christian message is presented in an Asian context. This enterprise is an emerging process, in which the "wayfaring aspect", a process, is clearly visible. On this journey truth will be disclosed as the Church listens to the Scripture and discerns inspirations and whispers of the Holy Spirit<sup>106</sup> and pays attention to the signs of the times. This process presupposes a dialogical approach with Asian contextual realities, combined with a willingness to learn from one another. It is compatible with an Asian mindset and worldview which does regards opposites not as contradictory factors but rather as complementary. However, the FABC's impetus toward creating this contextual and Asian-compatible theology is not a theological exercise for its own sake, but for the sake of Church's mission in Asia: "In any case, the risk of error does not constitute a valid objection against performing what is a necessary task: that of bringing the message of the Bible to the ears and hearts of the people of our time."<sup>107</sup> Another passage in which this two-dimensional and complementary vision is reiterated by the bishops states: "Inculturation is a journey of complementarity and harmony, where faith and its cultural expressions remain truly Christian while becoming truly Asian. It is in fact for us a matter of rediscovering and re-identifying with the "Asian roots of Christianity"<sup>108</sup> Later, the OTC re-affirmed the importance of holding both the Church's own tradition and 'Asian soul'. Only in this manner, in the spirit of complementarity and harmony, can the Church can communicate the Gospel faithfully in Asia.<sup>109</sup>

An impetus towards "being Asian" and "Asian-ness" necessarily concerns as well the question of how 'truth' is understood and explicated in Asia. Because worldviews in Asia and other parts of the globe are seemingly different, it can be assumed that these differences also have a bearing on the epistemological and even ontological aspects of how the notion of truth is presented in Asia.

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<sup>106</sup> "This [hearing the Spirit at work in the realities of Asia, through cultural and religious resources and a call to read the Scriptures in solidarity with all who lack peace] calls for a contextual reading of the Christian scriptures done with sensitivity to the Spirit who whispers in mysterious and unbounded way, through the rich cultural and religious resources of Asia." Third Asia-Oceania Biblical Congress, FAPA 4, 269.

<sup>107</sup> Third Asia-Oceania Biblical Congress, FAPA 4, 269.

<sup>108</sup> Symposium on Evangelization in the Light of Ecclesia in Asia, 10, FAPA 4, 252. On the significance of the Special Synod for Asia (Asian Synod) see page 46.

<sup>109</sup> TAC III, a, FABC Papers 133, 44.

Earlier, we noted that the Asian bishops admit that while there are universally valid truths, they need to be expressed in local forms.<sup>110</sup> Study of this very issue reveals interesting aspects of how the Asian bishops interpret the universality and locality of “Christian” truths. The next chapter will discuss important dimensions of this question.

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<sup>110</sup> “The Church has perennially held that there are universal truths, though admittedly expressed with the limitations of language and culture.” FABC 8, 87, FAPA 4, 33.

### 3. Towards an Asian Understanding of Truth

#### 3.1. Asian Truth: Universal, Practical, and Non-Exclusivist

In addition to the differences between ‘Asian-ness’ and ‘Western-ness’ with regard experienced theological or worldview-related questions (as discussed above), the understanding of the concept of ‘truth’ is a fruitful topic for analysis. Do the argued differences between the East and the West affect the ways of how truth is understood and conceptualised in Asian contexts? If so, what are they and what are the arguments for them? We have already seen that the impetus to become “truly Asian” affects the theological process of the Asian bishops. Is this impetus also present in the FABC’s search for truth, perhaps an “Asian truth”?

First, the term ‘truth’ appears quite often in the FABC documents; however, in the early years of the Federation the question of the nature of that truth was rarely discussed. Nevertheless, the 1970 Asian Bishops’ Meeting (ABM) already proclaimed that “Christ alone, we believe, is for every man “the Way, the Truth and the Life,” (Jn 14:6) “who enlightens every man who comes into the world” (Jn 1:9). We believe that in it is in Him and in His good news that our peoples will finally find the full meaning we all seek, the liberation we strive after, the brotherhood and peace which is the desire of all our hearts.”<sup>1</sup> With regard to truth, the primacy of Jesus is affirmed in this ABM statement. In the first plenary assembly (1974) of the FABC the statement ‘His Church in Asia must be Asian’<sup>2</sup> is understood as “expressing immortal truth in images which the common people understand and love.”<sup>3</sup> The Church is understood as the possessor and proclaimer of the ‘immortal truth’, although the meaning of this expression is not clarified further here. However, one gets the impression that in the early years of the FABC, the incarnation or inculturation of the Christian message was at least partly understood as expressing the ‘immutable and immortal Gospel truths’ in local attire and form. The supracultural character of the gospel, or the “gospel core” was assumed; inculturation and contextualisation would appear in outer, visible and audible matters.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ABM II, 6, FAPA 1, 13. John 14:6 is also quoted elsewhere in the FABC documents: OESC 4, FAPA 2, 22; FEISA 7.2.1., FAPA 2, 60; TAC 4.7., FAPA 2, 281; OE Symposium 4, FAPA 4, 250.

<sup>2</sup> FABC I, 10, FAPA 1, 22.

<sup>3</sup> FABC I, 9, FAPA 1, 22.

<sup>4</sup> This model is normally called the translation model, in which the unchanging “truth”, or the core message can be separated from non-essential and contingent cultural expressions. This model is also called the “kernel-and-husk” – model. Ahonen (2003, 28-39) presents the discussion on different models of contextualisation succinctly.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the first Plenary Assembly identifies the local church with the universal Church: “The local church is one with the universal Church, one with the See of Peter, blessed by the same Holy Spirit, sharing in the same sacramental life, living on the same Body of Christ, believing in one God, one faith, one baptism – but it is a church incarnate in people.”<sup>5</sup> This seems to indicate that in the bishops’ opinion there is strong unity between the universal Church and the local church. This statement indicates that the universal becomes visible and actualised in the local.<sup>6</sup> Obviously this view also affects the understanding and interpretation of “immutable and immortal” truth, which must be the same in the Church everywhere.

Later, there surfaces in the FABC documents the idea that the entire faith community is in service to and witnesses to the saving truth of Christ and his Church.<sup>7</sup> Here the stress is on the local faith community. This and similar themes develop more clearly as the Federation’s theology develops and matures and especially as it interacts and converses with Asian contextual realities: cultures, religions, and the Asian poor people. The FABC and Asian Church learn from being in dialogue with them. This indicates that the Asian Catholic bishops’ primary approach is inductive. The stress is on the local faith community as an authentic interpreter of faith which, by being in dialogue with local, contextual realities, strives for a better understanding and realisation of faith and truth.

The FABC’s contextual, inductive approach in this question shows that in the FABC’s view truth is not merely, and perhaps not even primarily, a theoretical matter. Rather, it concerns practical, daily life situations. As the Office of Evangelisation (OE) puts it: “In daily life she [Church] puts doing the truth before formulations of doctrine, reflecting the values of Kingdom rather than those of the local elite.”<sup>8</sup> The OE reiterates its point in the same document: “...doing the truth comes before the formulation of doctrine”.<sup>9</sup> This way of thinking imparts a certain non-doctrinal character to the Church in Asia. In saying this, the OE does not devalue the importance of the central doctrinal formulations of the Church,<sup>10</sup> but they also affirm one of their main principles: learning from the

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<sup>5</sup> FABC I, 9, FAPA 1, 22.

<sup>6</sup> See discussion on the relationship between the universal and the local character of the church in the introduction chapter, pp. 18-20.

<sup>7</sup> FABC IV, FAPA 1, 191-198 describes the Christian community which includes the following aspects: Communion with Jesus, Communion of liberation, Communion which has a Messianic function, it underlines lay apostolate, formation of and for the laity and lay spirituality.

<sup>8</sup> OE Theological Consultation 25, FAPA 2, 199.

<sup>9</sup> OE Theological Consultation 52, FAPA 2, 205.

<sup>10</sup> “However, in recognising the value of pluralism in theology, the Church cannot allow doctrinal irresponsibility or indifferentism. Legitimate theological pluralism ought to meet the basic standards of revelation (as conveyed through Scripture and Tradition), of the *sensus fidelium* (as contained in the faith of the People of God as a whole), and of the Magisterium of the Church.” OTC, Methodology 1.5., FAPA 3, 337.

context “what God is saying to the Churches”.<sup>11</sup> Again, this shows the FABC’s emphasis on an inductive approach. Listening to and being in dialogue with Asian contexts, the Church will learn God’s will in each particular contextual setting. Hence, the local context serves as an important guiding principle for discerning that will.

Listening to Asian contexts and discerning truth by being in dialogue with them also has specific epistemological consequences regarding the possibility of possessing and articulating truth. This question was addressed by the TAC in 1995: “Most belief systems assume that one and only creed reflects the truth. If each system is the Word, then others must be false.”<sup>12</sup> Obviously, the TAC does not subscribe to this view. In their view, the belief that one possesses the truth has led to regrettable results: “Moreover, those who possess the one and only truth feel obliged to spread it.”<sup>13</sup> What then is the solution to the question about possessing the truth and proclaiming it to others?

Applied to truth claims, the Office of Theological Concerns argues: “Rather than saying “A is true, so B must be false”, an Asian person tends to say “A is true, and B is also true in some sense.” In positing this, are the OTC theologians arguing that truth is somehow relative? The OTC does not make such a claim. For example, when the OTC discusses theological methodology for Asia, the OTC argues that there is only one truth which, however, is a Mystery which must be approached reverently.<sup>14</sup> In this treatise all Asian traditions integrate human salvation into a unified view of the whole cosmos. This view suggests that one specific salvation history cannot be exclusive. Again, an undergirding principle for this quite universalist thinking here is “Asianness: “The Asian way is one of integration and inclusion.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, with regard to truth, Asianness understood here as integration and inclusion appears to be an important framework for the FABC’s understanding of truth as well.

The experience of an Asian Christian as a Christian may have been mediated through a concrete Jewish and European history, but Asians experience it in an Asian way. This experience is said to be a fruit of the seed of the Word which has fallen into the soil of Asia, and which then produces

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<sup>11</sup> OE 53, FAPA 2, 205.

<sup>12</sup> TAC 2.4., FAPA 2, 255. To the FABC’s quite sharp criticism on Western epistemology and truth claims one could perhaps comment that for example the Christological dogmas of the old church managed to include paradoxes in their definitions. The Western church of course subscribes to these dogmas. Hence, it is perhaps not quite justified to assess the definitions of Western theology as representative of a sharp either-or approach.

<sup>13</sup> TAC 2.4., FAPA 2, 255. This is visible, for example, in the history of colonialism and Christian missions: the colonisers tried to convert the ‘heathen’ and impose on them Western ways of life and thought, resulting in their undermining and even destroying the value and dignity of Asian cultures.

<sup>14</sup> OTC, Methodology, Introduction, FAPA 3, 331.

<sup>15</sup> OTC, Methodology, Introduction, FAPA 3, 331.

fruits that might be different from the fruit of other branches.<sup>16</sup> This view can be linked with a wider, non-exclusivist understanding of truth which allows room and liberty for several interpretations. Thus, boundaries of truth become flexible. The OTC discusses this latter point in the context of Chinese religions, especially a Confucian religious context, in which the fusion of negative (Yin) and positive (Yang), contrasting poles, makes way for the safe path, or the “middle way” to the “Whole”.<sup>17</sup>

It should be noted that the exposition above discusses the concept of truth by means of a comparative approach and with the intention to explore how other faith systems might be able to help the Asian Church to understand the Gospel in Asia in a fuller manner. Hence, the FABC does not adopt all important concepts of each of the religions it explores; rather, the bishops explore the religions and seek possible conceptual and perhaps also epistemological-theological convergences by means of comparison. The “Whole” here seems to signify the FABC’s attempt to create space for an accommodating, non-exclusivist approach in which the truth is something which, without negating the importance of words, is beyond conceptual and notional expressions. Hence, this is an important methodological approach for a viable Asian Christian theology.<sup>18</sup> Yet, a question arises: are the Asian bishops of the opinion that the concept of the “whole” presupposes a common ontological transcendent “being” which different religions and philosophies reflect and interpret from different perspectives? I suggest that one should not read too much into this concept. Rather, it is better to view it as another Asian idea which the Asian bishops employ as they seek viable ways of presenting the Christian faith in an Asian-compatible manner. Yet another term, the “middle way” in the text cited above, (which is a standard Buddhist expression of the path to liberation), clearly shows the intention of the FABC to place their theology in an Asian framework. “Asianness” surfaces here, too, as the FABC explores viable ways of presenting the gospel in Asia.

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<sup>16</sup> OTC, Methodology, Introduction, FAPA 3, 330. Here appears an important theological concept of the “seed of the Word”. Its importance will be discussed in a detailed manner in chapter 4.1.

<sup>17</sup> “Systems of truths or values” are not easily assumed. One tries to accommodate every type of truth. Hence, boundaries become vague and flexible. Often no exclusivist position is found. Ambiguity of words is almost intended. As a matter of fact, the Chinese classics leave much room and liberty for various interpretations, because truth cannot be imprisoned in abstract, stagnant concepts and words. Words are meant to accommodate different values of life, so that life may find Wholeness by embracing whatever is said to be true of life. Truths are in need of words for transmission, but the same truths must be freed from words for the sake of understanding the whole. It is taken for granted that the Whole should contain what is negative (Yin) and positive (Yang). Only in the fusion and complementarity of the contrasting poles can one find the safe path, or the “middle way,” to the Whole.” OTC Methodology, 4.5.4.4., FAPA 3, 395-396.

<sup>18</sup> This long document (90 pages) of Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) is entitled *Methodology: Asian Christian Theology* and shows the seriousness and effort with which FABC pursues the creation of an Asian contextual theology.



In order to achieve a better and fuller comprehension of truth, the FABC sees the need for dialogue with the followers of other religions. We now turn our attention to this aspect.

### 3.2. Dialogue as a Means towards a Better Understanding of Truth

By this point it has become quite obvious that “Asian-ness” and the FABC’s thrust to become as Asian as possible affect the ways in which the Federation understands the question of truth.<sup>19</sup> This is a matter of central importance because the Christian revelation proclaims Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life. Immediate questions that are bound to arise from these kinds of expressions are the questions like how these “Way”, “Truth” and “Life” relate to other religions and philosophies that have specific assertions about truth. For the FABC, Jesus is the unique Saviour of the world. Moreover, he is the Way, the Truth and the Life.<sup>20</sup> Based on this and similar assertions, it seems that the FABC does not intend to relativize the truth about the Christian revelation of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. At the same time, the Asian bishops wish to convey their message in an Asian manner with the understanding that the Church does not solely possess the right understanding of truth and salvation. A key term here is dialogue<sup>21</sup>: the Church can learn from other religions and contribute to them. In this way the Church both gives and receives. Thus, dialogue means both a methodological approach and behavioural patterns: the way how the Church lives with the others.

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<sup>19</sup> Peter C. Phan (2002b, 119-152) discusses different concepts of truth between an Asian way of thinking and the understanding of truth appearing in Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Fides et Ratio*.(FR) In his analysis of this papal document, Phan poses critical questions to the pope’s interpretation of the relationship between reason and faith, and between philosophy and theology. Phan is especially critical of how the pope addresses the question of inculturation of faith in Asia. Phan observes that the pope’s primary intention is not to conduct a dialogue between the Christian faith and Asian philosophies and religions as such, but to emphasise the necessity of philosophy, especially metaphysics, for theology. Phan finds several references to Asian philosophies in FR. In his last remark in FR the pope touches on the question about the encounter between the gospel and cultures, i.e., inculturation. In Phan’s analysis, the pope’s critical questions to Asian religions do not hit the target. The pope does not seem to be content with Asian inclusivist and complementary understanding in which the truth can reveal itself in complementary and even opposite views and practices. This is the Asian yin and yang. In the words of Phan: “Needless to say, no Asian “conception of life” can be accused of holding “different doctrines, even if they contradict one another,” if by contradiction is meant logical self-contradictory negation and not simply opposites. Perhaps, this charge is not simply a misunderstanding of a minor point in Asian philosophies, but is symptomatic of the fundamental difference between two ways of seeing reality.” Phan 2002b, 134. The quotation marks inside the text cited here indicate direct quotes from FR. The Encyclical *Fides et ratio* can be found here at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_15101998\\_fides-et-ratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html). As the title of the encyclical indicates, the central theme of the encyclical is the relationship between reason and faith, or philosophy and theology. It is obvious from the title of the document that the pope does not see these two poles as contradictory.

<sup>20</sup> OE, Symposium 4, FAPA 4, 250.

<sup>21</sup> At one point OTC even suggests that the concept “dialogue” is not the most appropriate term for Asia: “The term “dialogue” is not as meaningful as the terms “relationship” or “sharing”, both of which resonate much more with our Asian religious psyche.” FIRA IV, 10, FAPA 3, 141.

For a fuller and a common understanding of truth together with Asian religions, the FABC's FIRA held several sessions (in 1998 and 1999) where specifically interreligious themes were studied, often with participants who were adherents of other religions. Regarding the truth found in this dialogue, the FIRA identified several aspects. First, and in an interesting manner, the FIRA identifies a vision for humanity that Jesus came to proclaim and live out as the "Kin(g)dom of God". It is a Kin(g)dom of peace, of mutual honour and respect. It is also a Kin(g)dom which has many windows and doors to welcome all peoples.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, God spoke, and still speaks, to all peoples in many different ways: "God manifests Godself in time and history, in our struggles and yearnings, our pain and suffering, hopes and dreams, in the whole created world. Dialogue is God's way. God is, you could say, a dialogical God."<sup>23</sup> This certainly is a remarkable rationale for the FABC's dialogical approach; when the Church practices dialogue, it is actually following the pattern of God!

Furthermore, God's very dialogical essence makes adherents of all religions into pilgrims on a pilgrimage to the Divine or the Sacred. On this pilgrimage we all share a common lot: a search for truth.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, there is a common inner core of spirituality which unites all pilgrims. In this search, a God who is beyond religions, languages and systems is encountered.<sup>25</sup> In saying this, the FABC does not deny the fundamental belief of Christians in the divinity of Christ, but rather expresses caution to not use their beliefs as weapons to exclude, condemn or judge others.<sup>26</sup> The following quote highlights important aspects of how the FIRA understands the relationship between the 'truth' as understood in the Christian tradition and in other religions:

In dialogue with believers of other religions we share with them the specific elements of Christian revelation without in any way absolutising them. Our faith in Jesus as the Christ does not require the expulsion of saviour figures of other religions, nor does it deny the salvific value of other religions. Following the footsteps of the humble and compassionate Jesus we share with others what Jesus means to us and hence could mean to other too.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding truth, this text exclusively denies that Christian revelation is the sole possessor of truth. This assertion also arises from Pope Paul VI's announcement that "dialogue is the new way of

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<sup>22</sup> By putting the letter 'g' in parentheses FIRA obviously wants to emphasise a more inclusive and familiar image of God's Kingdom; the Kingdom becomes 'Kindom'.

<sup>23</sup> FIRA I, 2.3. FAPA 3, 120.

<sup>24</sup> FIRA I, 2.5., FAPA 3, 120.

<sup>25</sup> FIRA I, 2.6., FAPA 3, 120-121.

<sup>26</sup> FIRA I, 2.12. FAPA 3, 121-122.

<sup>27</sup> FIRA II, 3.4. FAPA 3, 128.

being Church.”<sup>28</sup> This dialogical approach exhorts the Church to listen to what adherents of other faiths have to say. The entire dialogical model also concerns possible conversions of followers of other faiths. On this, the FIRA posits that as the Church is at the service of the Kingdom of God, conversion can take place in different forms: it can be “the humble and penitent return of the heart to God ... or a change of religious adherence, and particularly to embracing the Christian faith. The conversion of one’s heart to God ... is always a conversion to the Reign of God that Jesus envisioned; but it may not always be a conversion to join the Christian community.”<sup>29</sup> This dialogical approach, even the way of being Church in contemporary Asia, leads the FIRA to affirm that “Dialogue is not merely one ecclesial activity among many. It is a constituent dimension of every authentic local Church ... After Vatican II, to be Church means being a faith community-in-dialogue.”<sup>30</sup> Hence, this FIRA session concludes and affirms that “[...] in our Asian experience we have come to realize that such dialogue with our religious community is “a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment,” “purified,” even “transformed by the encounter.”<sup>31</sup>

The FIRA also explicitly comments on the Church’s assertion that Jesus as the Way and Christ: “In a culture of dialogue, statements like “Jesus is the Christ”, “Jesus is the Way”, and “Jesus saves” may be understood as expressions of love emerging out of deep relationship with Jesus.”<sup>32</sup> They express and verbalise fundamental beliefs of the Church and are thus specific types of short creedal assertions. In the opinion of the 1998 FIRA meeting in question, on the one hand these expressions testify to the fundamental belief in the divinity of Christ. On the other hand, in the culture of dialogue they should not be used as weapons to exclude, condemn and judge others.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, however, the FIRA firmly holds that the church is impelled to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. This “flame of the Word” cannot be held back: “We have to proclaim him as the Son of God, the unique Saviour of the world, the One who beyond human dreams fulfils the deepest yearnings of the Asian heart. We are convinced that the Good News of Jesus that we bear is our most precious

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<sup>28</sup> Here FIRA II, 3.7. refers to Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (65) which reads: “The Church must enter into dialogue with the world it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make.”

<sup>29</sup> FIRA II, 3.6., FAPA 3, 129. In a similar manner: “God’s saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person. His grace may lead some to accept baptism and enter the Church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be the case. His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of his grace.” BIRA II, 12, FAPA 1, 115.

<sup>30</sup> FIRA II, 3.7., FAPA 3, 129.

<sup>31</sup> FIRA II, 3.7., FAPA 3, 129.

<sup>32</sup> FIRA I, 2.12, FAPA 3, 121-122.

<sup>33</sup> FIRA I, 2.12, FAPA 3, 121-122.

gift to Asia.”<sup>34</sup> The uniqueness of Christ and the missionary mandate of the Church are indispensable for the Church. Yet a question remains: what does this uniqueness mean for those who are not (yet) members of the Church? Is there a tension or a dilemma? The demand for the exclusiveness of Christ appears quite “un-Asian”, for an Asian person seeks harmony and complementarity and avoids extremes.

As discussed above, the FABC’s solution seems to be to offer a dialogical approach. This could perhaps constitute a valid expression of a new *tertium quid* as a paradigm for an Asian contextual theology.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps its possible appropriateness in the practical “ebb and of flow of life” will have to be tested in the life of Asian churches. Here, the approach of the FABC is indicative of how the Asian bishops want to avoid exclusivist and absolutist assertions about Jesus Christ. This perspective clearly reveals the programmatic dialogical approach of the FABC.

One more aspect of the search for truth in the FABC’s theology can be discerned by examining how the Federation describes its journey as a “way” or “journey” towards a fuller understanding of truth. The concept of the “way” creates space for manifold expressions of truth.

### **3.3. The Asian Wayfarer on the Way towards Truth**

The above FIRA statement about Jesus as the Way signifying “expressions of love” is typical of pluralistic and relativistic positions in which adherents of different faith convictions hold that their own ‘truth’ is valid only within their own confines, whereas adherents of other faiths are free to follow their own truth.

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<sup>34</sup> OE Symposium, 4, FAPA 4, 250. Different aspects of the mission of the Church were discussed extensively in the 5th Plenary Assembly of the FABC in 1990. See FABC V, FAPA 1, 279-281. Here one motivation for the mission mentioned is the missionary nature of the Church; the Church exists in order to evangelize.

<sup>35</sup> Peter C. Phan seeks a possible *tertium quid* in connection with inculturation. Phan argues that it is “not simply a matter of adaption (much less translation) of the Christian truths (most if not all of which have been formulated in Jewish-Greek-Latin-European categories) to an alien tongue and mode of thought. Rather inculturation is a two-way process in which the Christian faith is given a better and more adequate apprehension, understanding, judgment, and formulation of itself, almost always at the cost of abandoning its own categories, and in which other faiths are in turn enriched by a better and more adequate apprehension, understanding, judgment, and formulation of themselves. Genuine intercultural encounter between the Christian faith and cultures always involves mutual challenge, critique, correction, and enrichment so that a new *tertium quid* will emerge.” Phan 2002b, 136.

What, then, does the FABC think regarding this matter? This complicated matter is discussed in many FABC documents. Perhaps the most thoughtful analysis is that of the Office of Theological Concerns from the year 2000. Following is a summary of their articulation. First, *de facto* plurality of religions is not seen as a threat to the Church; on the contrary.<sup>36</sup> Further, the OTC perceives an attitude of exclusivity as an obstacle to harmony and unity because it does not recognise complementarity between peoples, cultures, faiths and ideologies as enrichment:

One of the serious obstacles to harmony is the attitude of exclusivity, not willing to open oneself and see the beauty and truth in the other. At the root of this attitude is the failure to view the complementarity which exists between peoples, cultures, faiths, ideologies, world-visions, etc. For the promotion of harmony, it is important to cultivate an all-embracing and complementary way of thinking. This is something very characteristic of Asian traditions which consider the various dimensions of reality not as contradictory, but as complementary (yin yang).<sup>37</sup>

Here various dimensions of reality reflect complementarity, symbolised by the Asian *yin-yang*. In addition, the FABC reads the official magisterial documents as promoting unity in diversity and thus accepting plural theological expressions as long as they do not lead to relativism.<sup>38</sup> The OTC document then moves to epistemological and theological questions. It first notes the limitedness of human knowledge: theological expression can never grasp and express fully the mystery they try to approach.<sup>39</sup> No expression of the mystery is perfect; there is always room for additional expressions which can help in understanding the mystery better.<sup>40</sup> This presupposition leads to acceptance of a diversity of expressions. In the context of their search for an Asian theological methodology the Office of Theological Concerns discusses pluralism, which OTC sees as enrichment. In the view of the OTC, human expressions of reality are necessarily limited because in theology we deal with a mystery which is beyond our full comprehension. Thus, a plurality of

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<sup>36</sup> "In the cultural and religious traditions of Asia, harmony is a characteristic of Reality that all of us are called to experience and realise. Though our ignorance and egoism, craving and sinfulness is often a cause of division and conflict, harmony as liberation and fullness, joy and peace, realisation and nirvana, remains a desired goal for our effort through life. Pluralism and diversity are seen, not as a problem, but as richness. Even conflict and tension can be creative in the perspective of a harmony that is not static, but dynamic as life and movement." BIRA V/2, 3.1., FAPA 2, 151. The bishops also comment that reality itself is pluralistic, a characteristic seen in nature and human society (BIRA V/3, 1, FAPA 2, 155). Moreover, pluralism can be accepted being in resonance with the constitutive plurality of reality, beyond the extremes of inclusivism and exclusivism (BIRA V/3, 6., FAPA 2, 157).

<sup>37</sup> TAC Methodology 1.4., FAPA 3, 336-337.

<sup>38</sup> "In the official magisterial documents, we see clearly an encouragement to promote a unity in diversity. Consequently, pluralism in theology is officially recognised, provided such pluralism does not lead to relativism." TAC Methodology 1.4., FAPA 3, 337.

<sup>39</sup> "We know from experience that any human knowledge is limited. Moreover, there is a difference between every theological expression and the reality signified by that expression." OTC Methodology 1.5., FAPA 3, 337.

<sup>40</sup> "In theological knowledge, the expression always falls short of the reality, precisely because we are dealing with a mystery which cannot be fully comprehended. Since no expression is perfect, additional expressions are not only possible, but beneficial for a fuller understanding of the mystery." OTC Methodology 1.5., FAPA 3, 337.

expressions is beneficial for a fuller understanding of this mystery. “All these different ways of perceiving the one truth of reality enable us to comprehend that reality in a fuller, richer manner than if we had only one way to perceive it.”<sup>41</sup>

In many instances the OTC suggests an apophatic approach and mystical language in seeking to access the mystery of God. Support for this approach is found in eastern Christian definitions in which God (in God’s essence) is understood to be inaccessible, yet for which it is possible to participate in God’s energies. This view makes Christian theology a passionate effort rather than a rationalistic approach.<sup>42</sup> This means that in the OTC’s understanding, knowledge about God is beyond the human mind and comprehension; human language is inadequate for expressing the mystery of God completely. Here the FABC theologians find similarities with the Indian “not this, not this” (*neti, neti*) approach.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the OTC does not support the use of extreme apophatic language which denies any way of speaking about God. This would be theologically irrelevant.<sup>44</sup> Thus, theological terms and definitions are necessary for speaking about God. However, while promoting the usage of Eastern Christian apophatic approach to theology, the OTC does not fully equate eastern Christian spirituality with other Asian spiritualities, in which the

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<sup>41</sup> OTC Methodology, 1.5., FAPA 3, 337. Earlier in the same document the OTC comments on relativism paralleling it with subjectivism: “When a point of view lacks a common reference to reality, it amounts to the mere opinion of the subject who holds that opinion. When each and every such point of view that is cut off from a common reference to reality is assigned an equal value, then, it amounts to relativism. In other words, relativism holds that there are many truths which vary according to the subjects who hold different opinions of reality. Such relativism destroys the rich meaning of pluralism.” OTC Methodology 1.1., FAPA 3, 333. Here the document builds on history. Earlier, most people held to their own worldview and took it as normative. Perspectives were limited and cultures homogenous and even absolute. From this perspective it is understandable that, for example, at the height of the missionary period the missionaries regarded their own culture and faith conceptions as normative and transferable to all peoples. In this, the document refers to infamous Chinese Rites Controversy (ca. 1630-1715 C.E.) (on this, see e.g. Moffet 2007, 120-133 and Tan 2014b, 436-439). This perception is no longer possible as cultures and other structures of human life, including religions, have begun to intermingle. We have come to understand that reality, as we can obtain knowledge and understanding of it, is pluriform and pluri-dimensional. The OTC regards this positive, at least in principle, as long as it does not lead into a radical subjectivism or relativism which holds that all opinions and truth conceptions are equally true. This, the OTC argues, is a shared understanding among all Asian religions, especially with regard to relativizing basic human values. OTC Methodology 1.1., FAPA 3, 334.

<sup>42</sup> OTC Methodology 2.1.2.5., FAPA 3, 341.

<sup>43</sup> “God is inaccessible to us; yet humankind attains to communion with God... Theology is, hence, not rationalistic, but a passionate pursuit. It speaks the language of silence, which is the language of future reality. According to Clement of Alexandria we can be related to God, more by saying what God is not than by saying what God is. The Cappadocian Fathers were all apophatiticians. Gregory of Nyssa presents a paradigm based on the experience of Moses. He speaks of the manifestation of God first in light, then through a cloud, and finally in darkness. Gregory says that knowing God is a not-knowing. Knowledge about God is beyond the human mind. This is knowing through unknowing. Eastern apophatic theology starts with the concept of an ungraspable fullness. We close our eyes against the sun, not to deny its reality, but because it is full of light, and because we are unable to look at it directly. This apophatic nature of Eastern theology is very much related to the Indian “not this, not this” (*neti, neti*) approach.” OTC Methodology 2.1.2.5., FAPA 3, 341.

<sup>44</sup> “On the other hand, extreme apophatic language which denies any way of speaking about God and advocates total silence is theologically useless and irrelevant.” OTC Methodology 5.1.3., FAPA 3, 407.

Ultimate, Absolute Truth is ‘divine nothingness’ in which “both the human person and God as person are swallowed up” in an impersonal mysticism, an experience of absolute and divine nothingness.<sup>45</sup> For the Eastern apophatic tradition, which the Asian bishops seem to support, the ultimate goal which transcends both nature and person is the Trinity.<sup>46</sup> Hence, the FABC particularly utilises Eastern Christian spirituality in their enterprise, but in general do not utilise other Eastern religions very much.

It should be noted that in the text cited above the OTC discusses a methodology for an Asian Christian theology. This methodology naturally aims at creating a better and more contextually compatible theology. The Eastern apophatic approach which articulates a mystical dimension to the relationship between God/Absolute and human beings is more akin to the Asian religious-philosophical world than paradigms developed in western philosophies and theologies. It has been argued that the former’s approach to truth is different from the latter, in which questions about truth are uncompromising.<sup>47</sup>

It appears that in the question about truth the Asian bishops also accept the ‘pilgrim’ aspect of their understanding and theology: “[H]uman life stands between the now of what has been accomplished by Christ’s saving deeds and the not-yet of the fulfilment of these deeds at the end of time.”<sup>48</sup> This is applicable even to knowledge, which thus has an eschatological dimension as well. As the OTC quotes St. Paul: “Now we see indistinctly, as in a mirror; then, we shall see face to face. My

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<sup>45</sup> OTC, Methodology 2.1.2.5., FAPA 3, 341-342.

<sup>46</sup> “The goal to which apophatic theology leads is something that transcends all notion both of nature and of person it is the Trinity. ... The Eastern Fathers in general introduced a Christian apophatic theology which transformed rational speculation into a contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity.” OTC, Methodology 2.1.2.5., FAPA 3, 342.

<sup>47</sup> The OTC also sees some weak points in the mentioned categories of Eastern theologies. Here they mention especially lacking sensitivity to social realities and evils. In this, emerging new trends in Western theologies can help and inspire Eastern approaches. OTC, Methodology 2.1.4., FAPA 3, 346.

Felix Wilfred (2005, 238) distinguishes between prophetic and mystical approaches. He comments that though all religions have both prophetic and mystical streams in them, nevertheless there is difference in accent and orientation: “The “prophetic” model which we find in the Christian Scriptures –and in the Semitic tradition as a whole – is a model which stands for unambiguous and uncompromising proclamation of truth. Its immediate practical sequel is martyrdom. What it means is that a believer holds on with fidelity to his or her faith, and does not give in to any extraneous consideration. Martyrdom, then, is a practical and logical sequel. In fact, in the Semitic tradition, martyrdom is highly regarded, and has been considered as the apex of holiness. But such a thing comes across very differently to our neighbours who are part of a religious tradition that is “mystical” in nature. The mystical of course, does not involve indifference to truth or lack of adherence to it. But the approach to truth and to religious faith is of a different kind.” Wilfred’s observation affirms the characterisation of the FABC with regard to differences in approaches to truth in different traditions. However, ‘prophetic’ and ‘mystical’ are of course only one dimension of these differences. Another one, perhaps even larger, is the difference in worldviews which extends even to epistemological and ontological perspectives. Asia’s complementary and harmony-seeking approach does not call for the voice of an uncompromising prophet.

<sup>48</sup> OTC Methodology 1.5., FAPA 3, 337.

knowledge is imperfect now; then, I shall know even as I am known” (1 Cor 13:12).” The Church will grow in its understanding of truth in the guidance of the Holy Spirit who guides us into all truth (Jn 16:13).<sup>49</sup> The OTC then concludes its discussion: “Thus, with solid theological reasons, we can affirm the insufficiency of current human expressions of our faith. Such insufficiency allows for pluralism in theology.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, absolute and conclusive faith statements cannot yet be made. Importantly however, following the articulation of this vision, the OTC sets limits to pluralism by commenting that, despite pluralism, the Church cannot accept doctrinal irresponsibility or indifferentism. Pluralism, to be legitimate, must remain within the limits of revelation (Scripture and Tradition), of the *sensus fidelium*, and of the Magisterium. By keeping to these three the Church stays within the parameters of doctrinal orthodoxy. Moreover, legitimate pluralism is arguably essential for the Church’s significance for all peoples and also proves to be an authentic incarnation of faith.<sup>51</sup>

This OTC document does not speak about relativizing ontological truth and the catholicity of the Church; acceptable pluralism covers the diverse forms of linguistic and culturally related variations of expressions of truth and reality. Moreover, the OTC posits that everything needs to be checked against the three basic criteria of revelation, the *sensus fidelium* and the Magisterium.<sup>52</sup>

At the same time, however, the Asian Church needs to incarnate the faith in Asia in a relevant manner which, in turn, seems to create a tension in the understanding of truth between the Asian bishops and the Magisterium of the Church as expressed, for example, in *Dominus Iesus*.

After the foregoing analysis of the relevant documents we can now conclude that the FABC accepts the existence of universal truth(s). Truth can be discerned, but due to our human limitedness it will

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<sup>49</sup> OTC Methodology 1.5., FAPA 3, 337.

<sup>50</sup> OTC Methodology 1.5., FAPA 3, 337.

<sup>51</sup> “However, in recognising the value of pluralism in theology, the Church cannot allow doctrinal irresponsibility or indifferentism. Legitimate theological pluralism ought to meet the basic standards of revelation (as conveyed through Scripture and Tradition), of the *sensus fidelium* (as contained in the faith of the People of God as a whole), and of the Magisterium of the Church. We need to emphasise three basic criteria: Revelation, the *sensus fidelium*, and the Magisterium. They help us to differentiate a legitimate pluralism of theological expression from a pluralism which would destroy the doctrinal unity of the Church. Moreover, legitimate pluralism in theology is not only essential for the Church to be meaningful for all peoples, but it is also a sign that faith is incarnated in the history and life of different peoples, showing the vitality of the Church till the end of time.” OTC Methodology 1.5., FAPA 3, 337.

<sup>52</sup> The Church, especially its magisterium undoubtedly expects subscription to specific doctrinal definitions: e.g. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s declaration *Dominus Iesus* 4 (DI) in *expressis verbis* sees the Church’s missionary mandate as being endangered by accepting religious pluralism not only *de facto* but also *de iure*. See more on this discussion chapter 4.2.1. below.



unfold itself only as the Church journeys and remains in constant dialogue with other sojourners, especially those who live in the midst of Asian contextual realities. These realities are important for a fuller understanding of truth.

The contribution of Asian contextual realities to the comprehension of truth seems to mean that, in the FABC's thought, there is room for different definitions and apprehensions of truth. One faith pattern should not claim universal validity for its particular and inevitably culturally and philosophically conditioned and contingent patterns and formulations.<sup>53</sup> However, if one argues along these lines, at least one question remains: despite the shared agreement of the notion of truth as the same and as universal to all people, what is the usefulness of such truth if religions and philosophies are unable to say anything positive together about the truth? Certainly, practically all religions agree on certain ethical and moral principles about "doing truth", perhaps also on an existential and even phenomenological level. If, however, when it comes to the essential and ontological level, the only possible answer together is absolute silence about the truth, will all religions agree on that stance? The Asian bishops are not content with a standard pluralistic notion which accepts pluralism as the "ultimate truth about the truth". What, then, is the FABC's positive contribution to the question of the existence of and search for truth? Their one suggestion is the idea of a process during which understanding of truth will increase, and within which truth will reveal itself. For this idea, the OTC introduces the term "Wayfaring Theology" as expressive of an Asian way of doing theology. Because of the importance of this concept, the definition of the OTC deserves to be quoted here

In a general sense, all Catholic articulation of the faith can be basically called a "Wayfaring Theology, inasmuch it is the ongoing articulation of the faith of the Christian disciple, who seeks understanding within the journeying Christian community. As such, it involves constantly confronting the Word of

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<sup>53</sup> That Western theological patterns as such are incompatible with Asia is not merely a judgment of Catholic theologians. For example, the Korean Presbyterian Moonjang Lee assesses the unsuitable foreignness of Western theologies in Asia. First, he discusses the problem of trying to define a single Asian theology, or a single Western theology. There are no such things; there are only theologies done by Asians in Asia with Asian characteristics and theologies with the same parameters done in the west. One can perhaps question whether these pre-conditions are too strict. That would perhaps render Asian or Western theology non-available for students or scholars outside of these geographical borders. However, Lee is certainly correct in that most Asian theologies have been written by Asians. He also argues that it is not advisable to construct an Asian theology as a reaction to Western theologies. Doing that would show the impotence of Asian theologians to construct an Asian theology from their own soil. A 'genuine' Asian theology would emerge out of direct encounter with the Gospel when dealing with real life experiences of Asian peoples. Lee argues that, according to many Asian theologians and pastors, Western theologies are proven as impotent and ineffective in answering the questions that concern Asian peoples. He also presents a rationale for constructing an Asian theology. The first element is to recognize the impotence of Western theologies. An Asian theology must arise from the cultural and religious experiences of Asian people. These experiences have formed Asian epistemological frameworks which imply that truth is comprehensible beyond logic and rationality. However, Lee does not wish to reject Western theological methods *in toto*. Lee 1999, 256-275.

God which addresses human beings; and likewise, constantly confronting the words of human beings about God, attempting to understand, and realize the implications of the self-communication of God is part of the wayfaring theology. This “wayfaring” dimension is significantly present in Asian theology.<sup>54</sup>

The idea of wayfaring once more affirms the process-like approach to theology noted earlier in this study. The truth is revealed and understood as one, and the Church walks along the way. This way leads into uncertainties and sometimes to unknown and unexplored terrain. The fullest ‘Asian-ness’ possible is the goal which this Asian theological process seeks. The OTC concludes their ‘wayfaring theology’ by quoting a poem: “Wayfarer! There is no way. The way is made by walking.”<sup>55</sup> This approach introduces a dialogical dimension to the way in which Asian theology is created. It includes continuous dialogue and interaction between a Christian (and the Church) with God and his Word on the one hand, and with the world on the other hand.<sup>56</sup> Identified and accepted differences of worldviews and mind-sets between Asians and westerners at least partially explain how truth is understood and interpreted in the theological process of the Asian bishops.<sup>57</sup> However, it is important to note here that the OTC also calls this approach a “Catholic articulation of faith”. Thus, the OTC argues that their theological program contains nothing which contradicts the general Catholic understanding of the ongoing expression of the Christian faith.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> OTC, FABC Papers 133, 39.

<sup>55</sup> OTC, FABC Papers 133, 43. The quoted poem is from Antonio Machado’s poem *Caminos*.

<sup>56</sup> OTC, FABC Papers 133, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Peter C. Phan analyses these ‘fundamental differences’ (Phan 2002b, 135). First, he notes that FR speaks of ‘truth’ in the singular and in the abstract manner, clearly emphasising the universality and absolute character of truth. Asian philosophies will agree with the universal character of truth, but only with some further qualifications:

“First, truths are not the same as apprehension, understanding, and formulation of what is true. Truth, or better still, what is true (ontological truth) is by its very nature universal, and the judgment in which this truth is affirmed is true (truth as *adequatio mentis ad rem*), but a particular apprehension, understanding, and formulation of the truths need not and indeed cannot be universal, given the intrinsically finite, incomplete, and historical character of human knowledge. Furthermore, truths do not and cannot exist independently from particular apprehensions, understandings, judgments, and formulations, floating as it were above time and space like a Platonic form. Truth, or better, truths always manifest themselves and are grasped in these particular epistemological acts (truth as *aletheia* or manifestation); and their universality is always mediated in and through these limited and historically evolving acts of apprehending, understanding, judging, and formulating.”

Second, Phan continues his analysis by contending that reality or what is ontologically true, is, or at least manifests itself as plural. This signifies that no expression of reality or truth at any given time can express it fully and totally.

Third, all formulations of truth, of formulations of any truth are inevitably partial. Human beings always possess knowledge in fragments and partially. In Phan’s analysis this Asian approach does not compromise or invalidate the Church’s claim that Jesus is the perfect and full revelation of God. This is because all of the Church’s apprehensions and formulations about the truth revealed in Jesus will always be partial. Phan 2002b, 135-136.

<sup>58</sup> This approach can also be set in the framework of the fulfilment-paradigm. It seems obvious that the Asian bishops do not subscribe to the standard fulfilment paradigm in which the Christian “truth” perfects the elements of truth found in contextual realities. As observed above, the Federation nevertheless employs words that imply an idea of growing into a fuller understanding of truth. In the FABC’s paradigm fulfilment seems to be achieved in mutual dialogue and complementarity in which the Asian Church is both a contributor and a receiver. A more perfect understanding of truth is possible only in dialogue.

The analysis above has shown the struggle around the notion of truth in which the FABC has had to engage. It is quite clear that the Asian bishops have not managed to arrive at a conclusive answer regarding this question. The expressions the bishops use about “Asian harmony” and “complementarity” and the like seem to blur the whole matter. Thus, some theologians have asked if some Asian theologians “too easily resort to the *advaita* or *yin-yang* principle to push to the margins the necessity to pursue the question of truth of theological statements?”<sup>59</sup> This question shows the tension in which the FABC must live. It should be remembered that the main thrust of the entire existence of the FABC is to become a truly Asian church, the Church of Asia. To this end, the Asian bishops have been willing to reach out to their fellow Asians as far as possible. In addition, the bishops themselves confess that this adventure is not without risks and uncertainties. They themselves call it a pilgrimage.<sup>60</sup> But for the sake of the Gospel and for the sake of the mission of Jesus Christ entrusted to the Church they have felt that they have had no other route. At times, this approach leads to ambiguities in the bishops’ theological expressions. However, from the outset the Federation has seen that creating an Asian contextual theology is also a process in which understanding grows. Thus, when trying to understand the FABC on this subject, one should read the FABC documents as using a hermeneutical approach which takes the basic paradigm and impetus of the Federation into account: being as “Asian” as possible.

In their undertaking, the Asian bishops do not want to abandon the primacy of Jesus Christ and the centrality of the Gospel as yardsticks against which Asian contextual realities always need to be reflected upon and interpreted. But the process-like approach they adopt could also mean that all current paradigms for explaining and interpreting the gospel and Christian faith are not the sole and perhaps not the best paradigms. New paradigms may arise, but they need to be tested to ascertain whether they are compatible with the community’s experience (*sensus fidelium*). In a manner

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<sup>59</sup> See e.g. Kärkkäinen 2007, 120. Here Kärkkäinen does not explicitly refer to the FABC. He primarily discusses the theology of Stanley Samartha and also refers to Raimundo Panikkar and C. S. Song, among others. Kärkkäinen argues that the pluralistic orientations of these theologians emerge out of practical encounters with other religions rather than extensive theological reflection. He also builds on Wolfhart Pannenberg’s theology, according to which in all religions the dominant theme is the search for universal truth. Denial of this search would lead to the denial of religions which in essence postulate some sort of absolute truth claim. Asian tolerance and the mystical nature of the Asian religions do not make truth questions and claims about the understanding of truth insignificant. In the end, only the history of religions will show to what extent religions are able to illumine our experience of the world. The religion best able to cast light on the whole experience of human life and world history will probably prevail. Kärkkäinen 2007, 120-124. With regard to this issue, one can perhaps ask what measurement should be used in assessing the ‘success’ of religions and ‘illuminating our experience of the world.’ Historical ‘success’ and geographical spreading do not necessarily indicate the better ‘truthfulness’ or universal validity of a religion.

<sup>60</sup> “Asian theology is a new enterprise marked by a certain experimental character, a certain ambiguity, uncertainty and tenuousness. It is not yet a finished product, given the dynamic nature of the theological enterprise envisioned. It is rather a pilgrimage.” TAC Methodology, FAPA 3, 331.

typical of contextual and postcolonial theologies, in one of its sessions the FIRA welcomes and embraces substantial material from local contexts for the theologising process. This stance can be seen in the emphasis on using ‘Asian’ narratives, myths, poems and other Asian wisdom in creating an Asian theology.<sup>61</sup> The validity of possible new theological paradigms for Christianity in Asia must be based on the inner coherence of the paradigms “to reflect in its own categories the experience which the old paradigm had striven to understand and formulate.”<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, such paradigms need to be tested, evaluated and refined. In this, in the OTC’s opinion, the Church’s Magisterium has a pivotal role.<sup>63</sup>

The Office for Theological Concerns then suggests analogical language as one way to address the challenge about expressing truth. The OCT contends that analogical language is language that “steers between univocal and equivocal terms, as it includes sameness but with a greater difference.”<sup>64</sup> The OTC also notes, however, that this approach has been criticised. The OTC refers to logical positivistic philosophy, linguistic analysis, logical empiricists and functional analysts in this regard.<sup>65</sup> No single language style can absolutely encapsulate theological “truths”. Hence, in terms of language, this document seems to hold that language is always contingent and context related. Despite attempts to express “immortal truths”, the Church cannot establish perennial, universally valid and binding language in which to express all important theological truths.

In summary, it seems apparent that the FABC has had to struggle with epistemological questions regarding truth. On the one hand, they do not feel comfortable with the understanding of truth as it

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<sup>61</sup> “In the work of inculturation we need to go back to our Asian mythologies and stories. We need to “sit at the feet” of our Asian spiritual masters and sages and allow ourselves to be nourished by their wisdom, their sacred texts, not only our own.” FIRA I, 2.11, FAPA 3, 121. “Since much of the indigenous people’s worldview and ethos is compatible with the Christian faith, traditional beliefs, rites, myths and symbols of indigenous peoples provide material for developing indigenous theologies and liturgical ceremonies.” OTC 1.4.3., FAPA 3, 261.

<sup>62</sup> OTC, 2011 (FABC Papers 133), 40.

<sup>63</sup> OTC, 2011 (FABC Papers 133), 40.

<sup>64</sup> OTC Methodology 5.1.3., FAPA 3, 407. The bishops discuss this topic here at a considerable length. They refer to traditional scholastic theology as one representative of it. They cite the Fourth Lateran Council (1215): ‘Between the Creator and creature there is to be noted a greater dissimilitude than a similitude.’ The OTC also comments that the use of analogy can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle. It is a language in which each thing is spoken with respect to another and consists of three phases: the way of affirmation, of negation and of eminence. In OTC’s understanding this way of using the language opens up to the mystery of God, and this mystery is always greater than we can grasp. OTC Methodology 5.1.3., FAPA 3, 407.

<sup>65</sup> “This approach to God, however, has many limitations. It has been challenged by logical positivistic philosophy. Linguistic analysis has challenged the meaningfulness of this kind of God-talk, as being too rational and restricted. Logical empiricists deny that there is any way to verify the meaningfulness of theological assertions, because they cannot be verified objectively. The functional analysts salvage the meaningfulness of religious language by replacing the verification principle with the principle of use. This means that language is a sign pointing to a reality which, when detached from the context, becomes incomprehensible. The living context, the life and experiences of the people who use that language, determine the meaning.” OTC Methodology 5.1.3., FAPA 3, 407.

is customarily expressed in the west. It is too uncompromising, either-or, and puts the emphasis on logic. On the other hand, the FABC embraces the Asian framework of truth which avoids extremes and exclusivism. Here, again, the language the FABC uses steers between the universal and the local.

As a way ahead for an Asian-applicable theological approach, the OTC seeks a convergence, in which religious language is meaningful both at an existential and at an objective level. These levels cannot be verified empirically, but nevertheless are genuinely expressive of a cognitive experience. The OTC calls for a synthesis of both levels.<sup>66</sup>

This proposal for a theological approach leads to an important key word: synthesis. This concept seems an appropriate hermeneutical term for understanding the FABC's contextual theology. As the Asian Catholic bishops seek, and at times struggle, to find balance between the universal and the local dimensions of the Christian faith, their approach seems to be about bringing both aspects into a fruitful synthesis. This approach would also be a very "Asian" manner of presenting the gospel, as it makes room for a plurality of expressions.<sup>67</sup> Methodologically, this also calls for an approach which can be termed "symbolic theological discourse", which the bishops argue is "complementary to a discursive and rational theology."<sup>68</sup>

The preceding discussion has presented and analysed the FABC's theological approach as one that can be described as a journey of the "Pilgrim" FABC in Asia. The documents we have discussed show that this journey is not without uncertainties, as there is always room for fuller understanding and expressions of the truth. Quite clearly, here again the FABC seeks to make their theological enterprise fit into an Asian framework: "Asian-ness" which time and again constitutes an important parameter and condition of an authentic Asian contextual theology.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> "By synthesizing the analogous, empirical and functional linguistic positions, we arrive at a convergence where religious language is not only meaningful within an existential context of experience, but it also refers to some objective reality as well, which, although it cannot be verified empirically, is truly expressive of a cognitive experience. This conclusion paves the way for an experiential rather than a rational and logical approach to theology." OTC Methodology 5.1.3. FAPA 3, 407.

<sup>67</sup> On synthetic model of contextual theology see e.g. Bevans 2002, 88-102.

<sup>68</sup> OTC, Methodology 5.2.3., FAPA 3, 413. This symbolic theological approach will be discussed in the chapter 5.3..

<sup>69</sup> Aloysius Pieris has identified three theological models: scholastic (philosophical) model, *Dabar* (Word) model and *Hodos* model. In the first salvation is knowledge of God and theology attempts to explain revelation. Teaching authority (magisterium) is responsible and guarantees its right interpretation. Theoretically the Word of God may be above the magisterium, but in practice the magisterium holds the right to interpret the Word in an infallible way. The second model, the *Dabar* model, which Pieris apparently recommends, is the model of liberation theology. Here the Word creates and transforms, not merely interprets and explains the truth and the world. The continuing history of peoples becomes the 'venue' of salvation. The Word is primarily the Word obeyed, and this praxis brings the right understanding of the Word. (Pieris 1996, 140-142.) The third model Pieris names as the *Hodos* model, which means

When engaging in dialogical discourse with other religions, which is an important contextual reality and as such a theological locus, - the FABC agrees with other religions that they all are on a spiritual journey towards a better and more complete understanding of truth. This is essentially an inward journey which leads its practitioners into an encounter with “God who is in us and yet mysterious, always ahead of us, who is beyond religions, languages and systems and whose ways are not our ways.”<sup>70</sup>

This current chapter has analysed how an Asian worldview and “Asian-ness” affect the ways in which truth is understood. Because religions inherently contain truth claims, I have argued that precisely the question of truth is a fruitful topic for analysis. The foregoing analysis has argued that Asian-ness constitutes an important hermeneutic parameter for the FABC’s understanding of truth. The perennial truths of the Christian faith must come to be understood and expressed in ways that are faithful to the authentic revelation, and yet in a contextually comprehensive way so that the Asian Church can become “Asian” in all respects. Asia and its worldview and mindset challenge the Christian revelation of truth.

In the next subchapter our purpose will be to examine the question about of the sources of truth of the Church as they have generally been understood in the Church’s tradition and what the FABC’s position is on this question. This discussion will open up yet another perspective regarding where the FABC stands concerning the question about the relationship between the universal and the local dimensions of the Christian faith.

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theology as search for wholeness. It views theology as a path, a process, or a journey. Here a practitioner can be described as a pilgrim who gradually ascends a path via the moral life to the spiritual life, which consists of an ascetic stage and a mystic stage. Pieris concludes this approach: “[T]he goal becomes the all-pervading concern. Thus, Teresa of Avila seems to have wondered why Jesus the man tends to disappear in the process of her gradual union with God. [Thomas] Merton suggests the answer: Jesus is not the goal but only the way to it. To be one with Christ is to be fully in the path, and therefore goal-consciousness must gradually supersede the path-consciousness.” (Pieris 1996, 144.) Pieris’s characterisation cannot of course exhaust the entire contextual theology of the FABC; models are just that: models. Nevertheless, his analysis is helpful because he has seen typical ingredients of different paradigms. Applying his models, the FABC’s thought contain features of both the second and the third model.

<sup>70</sup> FIRA I, 2.6., FAPA 3, 120-121.

### 3.4. The FABC's Wayfaring Theology Challenges Traditional Understanding of Church's Tradition

As was suggested earlier in this study, the FABC's contextual theology can best be understood as an interplay between the traditional sources of Catholic faith – Scripture and Tradition- their magisterial (with special reference to the documents of the Second Vatican Council) interpretation and Asian contextual realities. This chapter will analyse how the FABC's contextual, "wayfaring" theology challenges a more traditional relationship to and interpretation of these sources.

Normally, Catholic theology acknowledges that the sources of revelation are the Scriptures and the Tradition. As will be analysed more thoroughly later, the FABC elevates Asian contextual realities to a level almost on a par with these two, with an important condition: "insofar as they embody and manifest the presence and action of God and his Spirit."<sup>71</sup> Undoubtedly this opens interesting hermeneutical perspectives on the interpretation of Scripture and Tradition. But first, we should ask how does the FABC understand the Tradition?

This question is discussed in the documents of the OTC in the context of other cultures and religions, but explicitly also in the area of specifically Christian sources.<sup>72</sup> In the Christian context, the OTC first subscribes to the normative Catholic understanding of "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture as one sacred deposit of the Word of God", which are normative and of fundamental importance for theology.<sup>73</sup> This statement echoes the definition of tradition found in the Vatican II constitution *Dei verbum* which uses the concept of "one, sacred deposit of the word of God".<sup>74</sup> Tradition, however, is not static but should be understood dynamically. In addition to the doctrinal

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<sup>71</sup> OTC Methodology 3.1., FAPA 3, 356: "Context, or contextual realities, are considered resources of theology (*loci theologici*) together with the Christian sources of Scripture and Tradition. Contextual realities become resources of theology insofar as they embody and manifest the presence and action of God and his Spirit. This is recognized through discernment and interpretation. It calls for theological criteria to recognize and assess the loci."

<sup>72</sup> See e.g. OTC Methodology 3.3-3.4., FAPA 3, 362-364.

<sup>73</sup> "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture as one sacred deposit of the Word of God enjoy primary normativity and fundamental importance for theology." OTC Methodology 3.3., FAPA 3, 362. Traditionally a distinction between the Tradition (with a capital T) and tradition has been made. Tradition with a capital T means the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the church, Christ himself present in the life of the church. By tradition (with a small t) is meant the traditionary process itself. Further, there are also traditions, e.g. different denominational traditions or cultural traditions. Vatican II dogmatic constitution *Dei verbum II*, 8-10 defines the normative Catholic position as regards the relationship between the Scripture and Tradition. Larson-Miller (2014, 531) refers to Robert Taft's understanding on tradition in the context of liturgy: "...Taft uses the concept of "tradition" as "theological speak" for "dynamic time": "Practice is determined not by the past, but by tradition, which encompasses not only past and present, but theological reflection on both ... Tradition is not the past; it is the Church's self-consciousness *now* of that which has been handed on to her not as an inert treasure but as a dynamic inner life."

<sup>74</sup> DV II, 10.

teachings of the councils, symbols of faith, creeds and liturgical traditions of the Church (*lex orandi, lex credendi*), tradition also ‘happens’ in the ongoing life of the church as “growth in the understanding of realities and the words handed on [which] takes place “through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (Lk. 2:19,51), through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth.”<sup>75</sup> Thus there is an idea of growth and of cumulative understanding towards the fullness of truth. The Church grows in its understanding of the realities and the words handed down through the ages.

This Vatican II -endorsed interpretation of a growing and cumulative understanding of tradition helps the Asian bishops to welcome contextual realities as necessary contributors of theological *loci*. Here again one can see how Vatican II serves as an indispensable source of inspiration and guidance as the Asian Church journeys in its search for an Asian theology and Asian-compatible way of life. A pattern of process is again clear here; understanding of truth is not predestined and carved in stone. This approach opens the door to welcoming Asian contextual realities and, consequently, Asian cultural, religious and historical traditions as material for theological reflection. This openness to the ebb and flow of life actually widens the commonly-held concept of tradition as something which belongs only to the past. The tradition of the Church grows, but that growth must take place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. An FABC related Asia-Oceania Biblical Congress (2005) states:

A mutual and dialogic interaction between the Word and Christian Scriptures and the voice of the Spirit coming through cultural and religious traditions of Asia can certainly enrich our experience of the Word and our exegesis and hermeneutics. It can also become a contribution to the universal Church.... This calls for a contextual reading of the Christian scriptures done with sensitivity to the Spirit who whispers in mysterious and unbounded ways, through the rich cultural and religious resources of Asia.<sup>76</sup>

Here it is noteworthy that an interaction among the Word, the Scriptures and the voice of the Spirit discernible through Asian cultures and religions is offered as a contribution to the universal Church; thus, a local interpretation can contribute to the universal. The document does not explicate further what the congress means by “a contribution”. However, much earlier a 1994 Faith Encounters in Social Action (FEISA) meeting<sup>77</sup> acknowledged that Asia can provide spiritual inspiration and ethical guidance to other parts of the world. Asia seems to be ‘sensitive’ to the divine Spirit beyond

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<sup>75</sup> OTC Methodology 3.3., FAPA 3, 362-363. Here the text cites Vatican II document *Dei verbum II*, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Third Asia-Oceania Biblical Congress, 12, FAPA 4, 269.

<sup>77</sup> FEISA operates under the Office of Human Development (OHD) of the FABC. This first FEISA meeting was arranged in 1994 and it was attended by 35 participants: bishops, priests, religious, and laity. FAPA 2, 57-58.



all religions, and in this the Church in Asia can respond to the spiritual quest of the world, especially in the area of interreligious dialogue.<sup>78</sup>

In 1977, the FABC had set certain limits to 'new revelation' which comes in and through Asian contextual realities; these realities could be received insofar as they embodied and manifested the presence of God and the Spirit. And especially here, the office of the bishop was seen as being of primary importance in safeguarding and guiding that new 'voices' and impetuses were compatible with the testimony of the Scriptures and by now accepted authoritative tradition. The bishop links a local church in space with all other churches and in time with the church of the apostles.<sup>79</sup>

Nevertheless, when one reads the FABC's theological reflection on the matter, one cannot overlook the strong, positive approach towards new traditions originating from Asian contextual realities. Contextual realities placed into dialogue with Scripture and Tradition can provide 'food for thought' and raw material for theological reflection, and this in turn can become an important theological resource which in turn can enrich the interpretation of the sacred Scripture and Tradition. Traditionally, Scripture and Tradition have dictated the ways in which the Christian message has been proclaimed and applied into new situations and contexts. Now, in their open and welcoming approach to Asian cultures and contextual realities, the Asian bishops seem to be quite willing to embrace sources other than 'traditional' (written) texts as traditions of the Church. This approach is congenial to Asian ways of communicating important matters. In this context, the OTC mentions stories, art, parables, myths and other ways of oral traditions.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, the OTC

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<sup>78</sup> "In close dialogue with the poor and the religious cultures of Asia, the Church would be able to rediscover its pristine dynamism which demands a radical emptying (kenosis) in its thought patterns, ritual forms and community structures. The age of journeying with sisters and brother of Asian religions is a privileged moment (kairos) for the Church to return to its original call. Many from other parts of the world today seem to look up to Asian countries for spiritual inspiration and ethical guidance. Only through inner kenosis and contemplative openness to the Divine beyond all religions, can the Church in Asia respond to this spiritual quest of the world. Interreligious dialogue in Asia is therefore an epochal need of the universal Church. This for us is the meaning of "Journeying with the Spirit into Fuller Life." FEISA 7.5.1.-7.5.2., FAPA 2, 61-62.

<sup>79</sup> "The reality of the Church becomes actualized in diverse ways at various levels; this is the mystery of the "local church" in its many forms. Among these, Vatican II has signaled out the "*particular church*" or *diocesan community* as having special ecclesial significance. This special significance is due to the presence in its midst of the bishop, by whose ministry of unity and presidency the diocesan community is linked in space with all other Churches and in time with the Church of the apostles. According to Vatican II the constitutive elements of the particular Church of the diocese are a community of believers, the Holy Spirit in whom they are gathered, and the bishop who, as "visible principle and foundation of unity" (LG23) exercises among them his teaching, sacramental and pastoral ministry (CD 11; LG 26). Asian Colloquium II, 38, FAPA 1, 75. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>80</sup> "One must also note that there are religions that have no formal scriptures but only oral traditions, as is the case of tribal religions with a primal vision of life. Oral traditions are also important resources of theology. It is a happy development among tribal theologians in India, the Philippines, Japan and Malaysia that they have started recovering oral traditions of the tribal religions, their myths and stories as resources for tribal theology. The primal visions of

appears to stretch the limits of the conventional understanding of the tradition in their willingness to receive and openness towards the voices and impetuses coming through Asian contextual realities. This approach can be said to be typical of the postcolonial way of interpreting traditions.<sup>81</sup>

What is innovative in the FABC's theology is this welcoming and open approach, which is combined with an Asian harmonious, complementary and organic worldview. These notions are the marks of an Asian church which attempts to make itself as Asian as possible and as accessible as possible to the peoples of Asia. "Raw material" which emerges from local contexts is welcomed as an interlocutor with Scripture and Tradition. This approach widens the understanding of tradition to include more than merely written tradition.

While attempting to be as 'Asian' as possible, the Federation naturally also intends to be Catholic. This can be verified from the FABC's continual references to the sources of the Christian faith, the Scriptures and the Tradition. The bishops are also very clear in preserving the basic ecclesial

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tribal religions and worldviews are significant *loci theologici*. Local Churches of Asia become truly local when they take root in these indigenous traditions." OTC Methodology 3.2.2. FAPA 3, 358-359.

Daniel Pilario has paid attention to this very question in his dissertation *Back to the Rough Grounds of Praxis. Exploring Theological Method with Pierre Bordieu* (2005). He argues that even if life's everyday realities – Pilario uses here the term *la vida cotidiana* – do not seem to fit easily in theological categories as one *locus theologicus* and consequently appear to be a novelty, they actually are nothing new. Pilario suggests that tradition has always been regarded as a theological locus, but it is only its mainstream interpretations that locate tradition as the written texts from the church Fathers, councils and writings of the saints. This, in Pilario's opinion, "shows the tyranny of the written text which is characteristic of the Western mind." Pilario also helpfully shows how theological reflection in the early church fathers had an inherent connection with practice. Pilario's intention is to move theological theory back to 'the rough grounds' of everyday life. This would mean a shift of theological attention to the ebb and flow of everyday life where "the daily struggle to survive but also to celebrate life itself becomes an experience of revelation. From the factory to the school, from the farms to the family kitchen, from picket lines to the parish church of village chapel- these are all privileged places of God's theophany." Pilario 2005, 540-541.

Pilario's treatise is helpful and typical to various models of contextual theologies. 'Truth' of Gospel is lived out and found in the midst of *la vida cotidiana*. A sharp separation between sacred Tradition and genuine, authentic traditions becomes somehow obscure.

<sup>81</sup> Kwok Pui-lan (2005, 66-70) discusses the importance of tradition in various theological traditions. She argues that there is an androcentric bias in the Western tradition of the church: "Women have been shut out from discussions of biblical canon, the debates on the creeds, the deliberation on church pronouncements, and the formulation of the church doctrines...the Western theological tradition has been taken for granted as the universal tradition for churches around the world. From a postcolonial perspective, the notion of tradition and its boundaries must be reconceptualised and radically expanded. Three issues need to be addressed: the move beyond Eurocentrism to multicultural investigations of Christian tradition, the use of resources from cultures historically not shaped by Christianity, and future visions of tradition informed by feminist insights and struggles from the global context... Besides critiquing Western Christian tradition, feminist theologians from diverse cultures are exploring the use of myths, legends, and other oral and literary resources for theology. In many Third World countries, the white male Christian tradition has been treated as the normative text, while indigenous traditions become the context in the process of inculturation or contextualization. But from a postcolonial perspective, the primacy of the whole Western tradition is contested, and indigenous resources should be used on an equal footing and interpreted intertextually with Western sources." (Kwok Pui-lan 2005, 66-68)

structures of the church. A local, particular Church is centred around the bishop as its head. Liturgical life, the Eucharist as the *culmen et fons*, is duly celebrated. Moreover, one cannot understand the theological program of the FABC without the directives of the Second Vatican Council. As quoted earlier, “the FABC is Asia’s continuing Vatican II.”<sup>82</sup> Also, it is clear that the Asian bishops understand Vatican II as a ‘colon’ to theological development in Asia, not a period or full stop. In their urgency and impetus the bishops have not been able to wait until satisfactory theological answers to all important questions have been identified. This sense of urgency explains the provisional and process-like character of the FABC. They have had to venture into unexplored terrain. But in their theological program the FABC wishes to be as Asian as possible, and this presupposes a contextual, inductive approach whereby the most important contextual realities become raw material for theology. The significance of this emphasis cannot be underscored too much because it also implies that the material gained from local contexts is not merely ad hoc material, but also that it can become a substantial resource for the future development of Asian theologies. Theologically and epistemologically, the FABC here goes to great lengths to embrace Asian cultures and religions as much as possible. At times, as referred to above, when the FABC delves into the specifically Christian sources of the faith the Asian bishops look very much like ‘ordinary Catholics’. But when they have to take a step forward, the traditional Christian stock of theological resources does not suffice. Vatican II, as interpreted by the FABC, inspires and encourages the bishops to move on, well aware of their and the Church’s mission.

But we can also ask: who has the right to interpret truth in Asia? This question is important because it also concerns soteriology. In the FABC’s understanding, a correct understanding of truth thus includes orthopraxis:” In her teaching she [Church] clearly distinguishes between the Gospel and her own doctrinal understanding of it. In daily life she puts doing the truth before formulations of doctrine, reflecting the values of Kingdom rather than those of the local elite.”<sup>83</sup> Sometimes searching for truth even comes before satisfactory theological and theoretical articulation of truth:

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<sup>82</sup> Kroeger 2008 b, Introduction. In a similar manner, the message of the tenth Plenary Assembly (2012) states that the same Spirit who animated Vatican II now calls the Church to become a renewed evangelizer. FAPA 5, 43. Hence, the Asian bishops see their theology as a continuation of the development, which began in Vatican II.

<sup>83</sup> Theological Consultation, 25, FAPA 2, 199. Aloysius Pieris discusses this issue in the Indic context where he finds that truth concerns the dialectics between theory and praxis. Truth, of course, is a soteriological question, and here in this context mutually inclusive of ‘seeing and doing’. In this perspective, “The basic ingredients of theology are seeing, doing, and speaking. Religious discourse is speech prompted by the perception of truth-goal and marked by the struggle to arrive at it. All other speech is purely speculative and soteriologically inconsequential. Christian “theology,” seen from this perspective, seems to be a religious discourse (logos) addressed to, by, and regarding theos, who is both the ultimate truth and the ultimate goal. It is a systematic discourse and a disciplined speech commensurate with that truth-goal.” Pieris 1996, 139.

“Since doing the truth comes before formulation of doctrine, the Churches in Asia should not wait a satisfactory theological answer before going further in praxis of dialogue and proclamation.”<sup>84</sup> But the mutual inclusiveness of ‘seeing’ or ‘knowing’ truth and ‘doing’ truth also contributes to a better comprehension of truth on a systematic, theoretical level: “It is in this systematic reflection on sustained praxis that we discover what God is saying to the Churches.”<sup>85</sup>

Who or what, then, sets the parameters for truth? The FABC answers this question in the above-cited text: “In her teaching the Church clearly distinguishes between the Gospel and her own doctrinal understanding of it.”<sup>86</sup> The Gospel is the measure and standard for the correct interpretation which, in the FABC’s analysis, is primarily doing the truth before formulating it in doctrines. Understanding and possessing truth has to be ‘materialised’, incarnated in the praxis of the Church. This praxis becomes visible and concrete in dialogue and in proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus. Here praxis is an inherent obligation following upon hearing the Gospel.

Thus, the FABC’s theological approach is often practical: Asian contextual realities await a response from the Church. Such an approach is also mandatory for the Church so that it can fulfil its mission as commissioned by Christ. These aspects are constantly present in the FABC documents. A practical approach also intersects with Asian religious milieus, in which a mystical dimension is always present. God, or truth, is beyond human words, followers of other religions are co-pilgrims on the way towards the goal, which is easily identified as the common goal, regardless of the language in which this goal is addressed. This last point resonates in an OTC’s text which goes so far as to define a specifically Asian way of doing theology:

There is an Asian way of doing theology; however, always keeping in mind that the continent of Asia is a complex reality of Asian people. One can speak about an Asian approach to theology, not merely in contradistinction to the Western approach to theology, but as one situated by Asian psyche and certain measures which characterize the context of Asia, as for example, the plurality of religions, the plurality of cultures, the rampant poverty and the fact that practically all the Asian churches are young churches in a minority situation. Moreover, the Asian way of doing theology will reckon with the Asian way of life and the Asian way of thinking. In the Asian way of life and thinking, one would see an emphasis on Asians as seekers of the way rather than as merely seekers of truth.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Theological Consultation 53, FAPA 2, 205.

<sup>85</sup> Theological Consultation 53, FAPA 2, 205.

<sup>86</sup> OE, Theological Consultation, 25, FAPA 2, 199.

<sup>87</sup> OTC, Asian Faces, 2, FAPA 4, 286. Another reference to “an Asian way of doing theology” was noted on page 43, n.26. There, “an Asian way” is characterised as a holistic, non-dualistic way which is a way of being rather than a way of thinking and rationalising.

This passage is significant, as in many ways it summarises the FABC's theological enterprise. An Asian theology ought to be a contextual theology which takes into account the important contextual realities of Asia. Moreover, it has to be Asian-compatible in a way which resonates with an Asian harmonious, complementary and organic way of looking at the world which enables a cumulative and progressive understanding of truth. All these attributes can be placed under the blanket term "Asianness." Asianness surfaces repeatedly as the key interpretative notion which constitutes the whole theological programme of the FABC. An Asian way puts the local aspect of the Christian faith at the forefront. However, paradoxically, this local emphasis does not exclude the universality of the Christian faith and teaching but rather welcomes and includes it in an "Asian" fashion. Hence, it is precisely this "Asianness, together with a progressive understanding of truth, that challenges the traditional understanding of the Tradition of the Church. Tradition "happens" in the midst of the ebb and flow of local contexts, as the traditional sources of the Christian revelation interact and dialogue with Asian contextual realities. The Asian bishops maintain that their Asian theology is characterised by ambiguity, uncertainty and tenuousness. Therefore it is an unfinished product, a pilgrimage.<sup>88</sup>

The next chapter will proceed to examine more closely the specific Asian contextual realities as identified by the FABC. What are the reasons the FABC names them as such realities? Moreover, what are the theological reasons that justify their position as resources for theology? One specific theme useful for a more clear analysis of the subject of the following chapter is the presence of the *Word of God (or seeds of the Word, Logos spermatikos)* in contextual realities. I argue that this very idea is a key for the Asian bishops seeking to build a bridge between the universal and the local dimension of the Christian faith. Of course the FABC has not itself created this specific term. This important theological concept is rooted in the Scriptures and in the early Church. It is also found in some of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. It is therefore important to take a look at the development and understanding of this important idea in some of these sources in order to understand the FABC's position.

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<sup>88</sup> OTC Methodology, FAPA 3, 331.

## 4. The FABC's Encounter with Asian Contextual Realities

### 4.1. Word of God/*Logos spermatikos* as a Bridge-builder between the Universal and the Local

#### 4.1.1. Word of God/*Logos spermatikos* in Some Early Church Fathers and in the Vatican II Documents

The previous chapters have sought to show that the Asian bishops have had to bridge a gap between different worldviews, philosophies and conceptual notions as they attempted to develop an Asian theology faithful to the tradition of the Catholic Church. In this chapter, I will further examine how Asian contextual realities contribute to the FABC's Asian contextual theology. In chapter two above, we discussed how the Asian pilgrim Church viewed Asian contexts characterised by an Asian worldview and mind-set. Although the subject of this current chapter seems to overlap that of the previous chapter, my purpose in this chapter is to demonstrate how the Asian bishops seek to build a bridge between the teaching of the Church and Asian contexts. Thus here I shall explore the dynamics that arise when the Asian bishops attempt to build bridges between Asian context and the universal Catholic faith as expressed in authoritative Church teaching and documents. Specific theological terms would appear to serve this end. Building bridges is not always easy; therefore the terms and means serving this end are significant factors in the FABC's contextual theology.

One term in the bishops' theological bridge-building is "Word of God" and its derivatives: "*Logos spermatikos/logoi spermatikoi*", and its English translation "seeds of the Word". In addition, the presence of the Spirit in Asian contextual realities has an important role in this.<sup>1</sup> How does the FABC utilise these notions in their attempt to build a bridge between the teaching of some early Church Fathers, Vatican II (and specific post-conciliar documents) and contemporary Asian contexts?

One reference to the early Church Fathers appears in a 1999 document produced by the Formation Institute for Inter-Religious Affairs (FIRA),

In sharing with others in Asia, the insights of early Church Fathers on the universal presence of the divine Logos and the universal dynamics of the divine Spirit help us significantly. While reading the sacred scriptures of the other religions we are touched by the enlightening presence of the divine Logos that we Christians have experienced in an embodied way in Jesus Christ. While encountering the lives

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<sup>1</sup> The question of the role of the Holy Spirit in other religions is discussed below in chapter 4.2.8.

of the believers of other religions we are moved by the vibrant power of the divine Spirit that we found revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

This statement of the FIRA of the FABC articulates the presence of the divine Logos and the Spirit, which are found not only specifically in the Christian scriptures and within the boundaries of the Church but also universally, even in the sacred scriptures of other religions. The Church understands the divine Logos and the Spirit to have been revealed in Jesus Christ, but in this FIRA document their presence is affirmed as being found elsewhere, too. We can therefore assume that the presence of the very same divine Logos and the Spirit can be encountered both universally and locally. Thus, these concepts appear to be a “bridge builders” between the local and the universal aspects of the Church.

Naturally, the term Word of God in the FABC documents often refers to the Sacred Scripture and Tradition and also to the Church’s proclamation.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it is apparent that the concept has a theologically broader and richer meaning. “Word of God”, “seeds of the Word (*Logos spermatikos*)” also appear to be employed in the FABC’s text corpus as an important point of access between the gospel and Asian cultures. It was mentioned for the first time in the 1974 first Plenary Assembly, and it appears then repeatedly over the course of the following years. The last time the “Seeds of the Word” explicitly appears in the FABC documents is in the 2004 eight Plenary Assembly.<sup>4</sup> Thus the concept also represents an important theological term in the contextual

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<sup>2</sup> FIRA II, 3.1., FAPA 3, 126.

<sup>3</sup> The Word of God is, for example, the Bible incarnated in human language (TAC, Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 3.2., FAPA2, 266), the source of theology in the Scriptures and Sacred Tradition (OTC, Methodology, FAPA 3, 332), something which came to enlighten every man (Jn. 1:9) (OTC, Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 357.) The Word of God is also Jesus Christ present in the Scripture, Tradition, Liturgy and the witness of the Church (FAPA 2, 30). Further, the word of God is the actual proclamation and listening to that word. Seeds of the word of God can be identified in other religions (FABC 1, IV.16, FAPA 1, 14). The Word of God became flesh in Jesus Christ (see i.e. International Congress on Mission I.1, FAPA 1, 138). Interestingly, the FABC also asserts that the word of God as the Transcendent is also present in other religious traditions and their sacred scriptures. Consequently, one can call them in some sense the word of God in the words of men. (OTC, Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 358.) On the possibility of reading non-biblical texts, of other religions as well, in the Church’s liturgy and their status as considered inspired see e.g. Gispert-Sauch 2014, 487-489.

<sup>4</sup> In the chronological order the “Seeds of the Word (*logos/logoi spermatikoi*, germinative seeds) in the FABC documents are the following: “seeds of the Word of God in other religions”, (FABC 1, 16, FAPA 1, 14); “seminal reasons(*logoi spermatikoi*) in modern man’s old and new religions”, (Asian Colloquium 19, FAPA 1, 71); “Seeds which God’s own hand has planted in our ancient cultures even before the Gospel was preached to our people”, (FABC 2, 11, FAPA 1, 31; 8); “inculturation is a discovery of the seeds of the Word which lie hidden in the given cultures and living traditions”, (International Congress on Mission 8, FAPA 1, 139); “We discover the seeds of the Word in other religions and we become to and ready for a process of change.” (International Congress on Mission 4 c., FAPA 1, 142); “He [God] has imprinted traces of his revelation in the world ... and in the “seeds of the Word” found in cultures and other religious traditions.” FABC 5, 3.1.1., FAPA 1, 279); “Seeds of the Word”, OESC 3, FAPA 2, 22 (same text also “seeds of the divine message”); “Seeds of the Word contained in religious traditions”, (OE Theological Consultation 49, FAPA 2, 204); “The seed of the Word has fallen into the soil of Asia”, (OTC Methodology, FAPA 3, 330); “Germinative seeds of

theology of the FABC, presumably even a key term in the FABC's attempt to establish a connection between the universal and the local character of the Christian faith and teaching. Furthermore, previous studies on the FABC's theology have not paid much attention to the possible importance of the concept.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore necessary to carefully analyse the significance of this terminology in the FABC's theology

Of course, the FABC did not develop these theological terms itself; in addition to the Johannine usage of the term *Logos*, these concepts appear as important concepts in patristic theology. The universal presence of the divine Logos, as affirmed by the passage cited above, opens up questions around the possibility of Christ's influence extending beyond the Church, perhaps even before Christ's incarnation as well, and thus also the question of possible access to this divine Logos for people before and outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>6</sup> If one accepts this possibility of access to the divine Logos outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, one can argue that there have been people

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the Word in Asian cultural resources" (OTC Methodology 3.2.1., FAPA 3, 357); "Seeds of the Word, found in human enterprises, including religious ones, and in customs and cultures of peoples preparing them for the fullness of the Gospel", (OTC Methodology, 3.4., FAPA 3, 364); "Spirit-given seeds of the Word in other religious and faith-traditions", (FABC 8, 88, FAPA 4, 33-34).

<sup>5</sup> Some studies exist on the theology of Spirit of FABC. See e.g. the following doctoral dissertations: Varayilan, *Pilgrim Church and the Holy Spirit: A Comparative Study of the Pneumatological Ecclesiology of Cardinal Yves Congar and the FABC Documents (1970-2005)*, 2006, and Mendoza, *A Church in Dialogue with Peoples of Other Faiths: A Journey to the Kingdom in the Spirit: The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1970-2007, 2008*. Varayilan's analysis is quite shallow; it is descriptive and comparative without attempting a deeper analysis of the FABC's theology. As for Mendoza, its author meticulously analyses the theology of religions of the FABC. Both of these studies correctly see the significance of the Holy Spirit as operating outside the Christian dispensation. In many instances in the FABC text corpus, the Spirit and the Word appear together. However, the notion "Word of God" and its derivatives do not receive enough attention in these dissertations.

<sup>6</sup> Grillmeier (1975, 89-94) discusses the development of the doctrine of *Logos spermatikos* in the early church, especially in the theology of Justin Martyr. Justin's intention was to "prove the divinity of Christ to the heathen from the prophesies of the Old Testament." Grillmeier 1975, 89-90. Grillmeier further argues that Justin managed to emphasise the Christian character of the Logos doctrine. Grillmeier comments that particularly in his *Logos spermatikos* theology Justin was influenced by Stoicism and Middle Platonism. "By virtue of the activity of the Logos, all men are capable of forming certain moral and religious concepts. They are called φυσικαὶ ἔννοιαι or κοιναὶ ἔννοιαι or even σπέρματα. Therefore the Logos as an active principle can also be called σπέρματικὸς Λόγος." Grillmeier 1975, 91. In Justin's thought the σπέρματα participate in the Logos and they are created from the activity of the Logos. However, participation in the Logos of the σπέρματα is only partial and must be brought to fulfilment by the Logos itself. Thus, the presence of only the "seeds of the Logos" means that also the Logos itself is present only partially. But since the Logos is the source of all knowledge and truth (whether partial or full knowledge and truth), the Logos is therefore the subject and norm of all knowledge and truth. Consequently, the Apologists claimed that the ancient philosophers lived according to the Logos but that they knew the Logos only partially and obscurely. Therefore Justin's Logos and *Logos spermatikos* theology contain seeds and elements for the development partial knowledge and truth in philosophies and religions which would reach their fulfilment in the Logos, Jesus Christ. Grillmeier (1975, 94) concludes: "Not only does he [Justin] put Christ in the Old and New Testament perspectives of prophecy and fulfilment, but he makes the Greek world and the history of its thought into a prelude and a preliminary to Christianity."

See also a lucid presentation of Logos theology in the Apologists in Kelly 1968, 95-104. In addition to Justin, the most prominent theologians in the early church who discussed the notion of the Logos were Irenaeus (130- 202) and Clement of Alexandria (c. 150- c. 215).



everywhere who lived by this Logos.<sup>7</sup> This argument naturally diminishes the distinction between an order of natural truth and supernatural truth; perhaps there is only an obscure knowledge and a clear knowledge of the Truth, which is Logos, the Word.<sup>8</sup> This can also affect the theologically important definition of the clear difference between natural and supernatural, or nature and grace. This question, of course, has a significant bearing on understanding of different religions and faith convictions. If Christ and his mercy are available outside of the confines of the Church, can the followers of other faiths also be participants in Christ, at least anonymously?<sup>9</sup> This line of thought implies the idea of a history of the Logos as a history of salvation with the coming of Christ as its climax.

This later line of early Christian Logos-theology organises the history of salvation around the concept of the Logos. In addition, pre-Mosaic and pre-biblical religions can be integrated into this history. All divine cosmic and historical manifestations of the God-Father took place through the

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<sup>7</sup> Dupuis 2000, 57. This reading of Justin's interpretation of the Logos is however not unanimously accepted among theologians. For example, Joseph Carola 2010, 34-48, discusses the notion the "seminal Word (*logos spermatikos*) in Justin's and other early church fathers' writings. In Carola's reading of Justin, considering the possible salvation of non-Christians not mean seeking any salvific good in other religious practices. Hebrew people and Greek philosophers preceded the Christian community in rejecting pagan worship. "For these errors were not only condemned among the Greeks "by reason" (*hypo logou*) through Socrates, but among the barbarians (i.e. the Hebrews) "by Reason himself" (*hyp' autou tou logou*) who took form and became man and was called Jesus Christ." (Carola 2010, 35) Carola cautions that Justin's aims were apologetic; therefore we should not over-interpret the theory of *Logos spermatikos*.

Jacques Dupuis was under investigation of Congregation for the Doctrine and the Faith (CDF) in 1998-2000. This happened after he published the book referred in the present discussion. The themes under the scrutiny of the CDF in Dupuis's book concerned the salvific mediation of Jesus Christ, the unicity and completeness of revelation of Jesus Christ, the salvific action of the Holy Spirit, the orientation of all human beings to the Church, and the value and salvific function of the religious traditions. After a long process of scrutiny, Dupuis was eventually vindicated, although he was requested to sign a statement that his book was to be interpreted in the light of the CDF declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000). See Chia 2012, 31-42. The process of this investigation, as well as differences between Dupuis and the CDF in the possibility of ascribing salvific function to other religions, reveal the sensitivity of the matter at stake here. Grezlak (2009, 35) sees both negative and positive aspects in Dupuis's disagreement with the Vatican: "His disagreement with the Vatican placed him into a group of those (in fact very few) pioneering theologians who helped to give Catholic theology much needed vitality."

<sup>8</sup> Grillmeier 1975, 92. Dupuis (2000, 59) summarises Justin's Logos-theology as follows in four points: (1) There exist three kind of religious knowledge: that proper to the nations, the Jewish and the Christian; (2) of all religious knowledge in its different kinds, the Logos is the unique source; (3) the difference between the various kinds of knowledge corresponds to various forms of participation in the Logos: extending to the whole cosmos and to all human beings, the intervention of the Logos in Israel becomes mode decisive; it is complete only in Christ's advent in the flesh; and (4) all persons who have known the Truth and lived righteously are Christians, for and insofar as all have partaken of, and lived according to, the Logos who is all Truth. He cites Daniélou 1973, 44.

<sup>9</sup> This idea is commonly known as "anonymous Christians"; a term coined by Karl Rahner. Rahner did not, however, intend the term be used in interreligious dialogue; rather, it was meant to be used within Christian "circles". Kelly (1968, 96) contends: "Before Christ's coming men had possessed, as it were, seeds of the Logos and had thus been enabled to arrive at fragmentary facets of truth. Hence such pagans as 'lived with reason' were, in a sense, Christians before Christianity." Dupuis also (2000, 60) finds a connection to the concept "anonymous Christians" in the writings of Justin Martyr as Dupuis interprets Justin seeing Christianity existing beyond its visible boundaries and even before its historical birth. Grezlak (2009, 53-55) provides a clear and concise explanation of Rahner's famous concept.

Logos. This would mean that consequently all theophanies are actually “Logophanies”. The first divine manifestation is creation, and there is no distinction between cosmic and historical manifestations. Creation itself is a historical and personal manifestation of the Logos.<sup>10</sup>

Another model, which later came to be called as the “fulfilment- model”, can also be traced in the writings of the early Church Fathers.<sup>11</sup>

It is apparent that the Logos has salient significance for the interpretation of the economy of God’s revelation and salvation in the theology of some early Church Fathers. The Logos, especially understood as the synonym for the Word, is an important hermeneutical key for understanding these theologies. What the possible implications are for the arena of theology of religions remains a

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<sup>10</sup> This is the view of Irenaeus. For Irenaeus, to know God the Father is to know him as a person on an existential level who addresses himself to us. Such an encounter is actually an encounter with the Logos. This knowledge of God has been revealed to all on account of creation and through the cosmic Logos, the Word of God and Son of God. This knowledge of the Father is not to be distinguished from that which we normally call natural knowledge of God. Furthermore, God’s self-disclosure e.g. in the Old Testament times was actually “Logophany”, the Word, or even Jesus Christ was present in the OT economies. This presence of Christ already in the OT revelation raises the question: what is the significance of Christ’s incarnation in the flesh if he is already present in earlier manifestations? Irenaeus’s answer is that the pre-incarnation manifestations are proclamations of the coming king, whereas Christ’s appearance in the flesh is the actual coming of the king. In the old dispensation the Logos was in a certain sense made visible- visible to the mind- but he became visible to the eyes by his advent in flesh. See Dupuis 2000, 60-66.

<sup>11</sup> This thought is found, e.g., in Clement of Alexandria. In it there can be distinguished two levels of knowledge of God: a common, elementary knowledge through the use of reason (logos, here; human reason). This is possible for all and it is natural. A more advanced level of knowledge is acquired by the personal action of the Logos, which introduces people into God’s otherwise inaccessible secrets. The influence of the Logos extends beyond the boundaries of Judeo-Christian tradition. The philosophy of the Greeks and their achievements in human wisdom and religiosity witness to a special divine assistance granted them. Here philosophy is a covenant which God made with people and a stepping-stone to the philosophy of Christ. But philosophy loses its *raison d’être* as soon as Christ has come. Thus, philosophy is a partial knowledge, whereas Christ is the whole truth. Clement refers also to Indian sages, with a reference also to the teachings of Buddha. In this theological view possible partial presence of the Christian truth can be discerned in Buddhist traditions. This would attest a positive significance to these traditions in the history of salvation. Dupuis 2000, 66-70.

Carola 2010, 37-40, contends that, for Clement, philosophy is propaedeutic to faith. It does not discover the entire truth but only partial truths. Christian revelation surpasses both human reason’s efforts and the preparatory movements of divine inspiration. After the incarnation of the Logos, philosophy remains useful but not necessary. Before Christ, philosophy served the Greeks as the Old Covenant served the Hebrews: it pointed towards Christ. There is only one history of salvation in which God acts in various ways with diverse peoples. These acts flow toward and find their fulfilment in Christ. Carola 2010, 46 concludes discussion of the four Church fathers (Justin, Clement, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Augustine) as follows: “Justin, Clement, Eusebius and Augustine acknowledge the necessity of revelation for salvation. Justin’s *logos spermatikos* theory accounts for the natural revelation of God’s existence and the universal moral law ... He likewise admits the presence of supernaturally revealed truths in Greek thought ... One can safely conclude that for Justin the seminal word universally present differs in kind from Judeo-Christian revelation. Only the latter perfects human knowledge and brings with it the promise of salvation. Clement ... effectively teaches that divine inspiration in Greek philosophy and divine revelation in the Judeo-Christian tradition differ only in degree. ... Eusebius insists upon the unique nature of God’s revelation to the Hebrews. ... Augustine acknowledges human reason’s ability to arrive at certain truths. On this account, philosophy serves a noble purpose. But such rational insights remain limited and are without salvific value. ... Our patristic authors unanimously attest that the incarnation is the decisive moment in the history of salvation. Justin would no doubt acknowledge the *sperma tou logou* present in those who since the incarnation have yet to hear the gospel preached, but he would insist that the seminal word plays a secondary and notably inferior role to the Logos, who has become wholly incarnate in Jesus Christ.”

matter of discussion, even dispute. As has been discussed above, in the writings of the early patristic authors one can find material supporting a broad understanding of salvation outside the Judeo-Christian dispensation. On the other hand, however, it seems to be possible to interpret the texts of these same authors about the salvific value of other religions in the way in which no independent salvific value is attested to other religious traditions. These themes also surface in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and in specific post-Conciliar writings. They also form an important background theological discussion for the developing contextual theology of the FABC.<sup>12</sup>

The Second Vatican Council addresses the question of the Logos (*logos spermatikos*) in the context of the relationship between the Church and other religions. This very matter is one of the most debated questions (and one of the most hotly debated) questions since the Vatican II: how is the Council's theology about non-Christian religions to be understood? It is generally agreed that the Council opened up new horizons regarding other religions. In several places, the documents of the Council use these above-mentioned patristic themes concerning other religions..<sup>13</sup> The question about the possible salvific nature of other religions has been much debated since the Council. However, there is general agreement that the old *extra ecclesiam* paradigm, in which salvation is explicitly bound to belonging to the Catholic Church, is no longer the position of the Church.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, it is widely accepted that the Second Vatican Council proposed no final answers to questions regarding how the Church and its believers should understand other faiths while at the same time being faithful to their own tradition.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Post-conciliar and contemporary trends especially in the arena of theology of religions is discussed extensively in *Catholic Engagement with World Religions* (2010, 317-356).

<sup>13</sup> Of primary importance of these themes are the theological ideas of *praeparatio evangelica*, *Ecclesia ab Abel*, *paedagogia divina* and *semina Verbi*. The Conciliar texts where these terms appear are *Lumen Gentium* 2, *Lumen Gentium* 9, *Lumen Gentium* 16, *Lumen Gentium* 17, *Ad Gentes* 3, 9, 11, and 15, and *Nostra Aetate*.

<sup>14</sup> For extensive treatment of the question about salvation outside the church, see Sullivan 2002.

<sup>15</sup> D'Costa (2000, 101-109) examines this delicate question. He maintains that the conciliar documents are intentionally silent on the matter: "In the light of the above comments, I hope to have shown that it is difficult to read the Conciliar documents as giving a positive answer to the question: can other religions, *per se*, in their structures be mediators of supernatural revelation and salvific grace? While it is true that that there is no explicit negative answer, there is certainly no positive answer." (D'Costa 2000, 105). He also asserts that the question was intentionally left open given the truth of the gospel. (Idem.) One decisive matter between different arguments boils down to the question about the relationship between grace and nature. D'Costa further discusses this problem in the light of two papal documents: *Redemptoris Missio* (RM), and *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994). D'Costa's understanding of these documents of the Pope John Paul II is that the Pope stays within the fulfilment paradigm; grace encountered in other religions is viewed as *praeparatio evangelica*; however "not in terms of a division between the grace of creation and the grace of salvation, or natural and supernatural grace, but only because within the historical church is this grace finally properly ordered toward its eschatological fulfilment." D'Costa concludes his elucidation by contending that the intentional silence of conciliar and specific post-conciliar documents indicates that pluralism and inclusivism

Following the completion of this analysis, it will be possible to examine where the FABC stands on the matter. What are points of convergence and possibly also points of divergence between the theologies of the FABC and that of which is presented in authoritative documents of Vatican? As indicated above, the matter is not easy to answer; the Council's documents do not always seem to be definitive and they leave many questions open to different theological interpretation and possible development.

In the following I will present two contrasting interpretations of the Vatican II documents on the question of the possibility of the salvific nature of other religions in general, and specifically with regard to the usage of the concept of the *Logos spermatikos*. The two theologians whose views will be addressed are *Ilaria Morali* and *Jacques Dupuis*. The intention of this comparison is to show the complexity of the interpretation of this delicate issue. After that, I will move on to the FABC's understanding of the question.

Ilaria Morali is Tenured Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University. She has argued that Vatican II and post-conciliar official documents of the magisterium of the Church deny any salvific or supernatural function of other religions or religious elements that can possibly be found in other cultures; "whatever good" found in other religions can only serve as a *preparatio evangelica* for the Christian message of salvation. Thus, this "whatever good" needs fulfilment, purification, and perfection.<sup>16</sup>

Morali finds only one possible *hapax legomenon* in the post-conciliar documents: in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (RM), in which the pope writes about "participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees" as possible means of entering into communion with God, in addition to that of Christ. The pope explicitly affirms that the "participated forms" acquire

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are not sanctioned. There is room for developing "a theology of religions which acknowledges that the history of religions is an important site where God may be acting." D'Costa 2000, 109.

<sup>16</sup> "[W]hatever good is found in other religions can constitute an authentic preparation for the gospel and that there can exist the real possibility for every person of good will to attain eternal salvation, even those who do not yet know the revelation of Christ. This doctrine included the principle of the necessity of the faith for salvation and at the same time maintained intact the value of the missionary mandate ...Such a doctrine, which at bottom positively acknowledges the results of the theological reflections of Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou rather than the Rahnerian theological hypothesis of religions as temporary "ways of salvation", leaves no space either for doubt or for interpretations of a relativistic stamp." Morali 2010, 142. It is noteworthy that Morali does not discuss *Gaudium et spes* (GS) here. While it is true that GS does not address the question on possible salvific value of other religions directly, its urgent tone in addressing the humanity, which now has entered a new stage of history, finds a good soil in Asian contexts. Morali's argument here reveals two important and disputed issues at stake as Catholic theologians attempt to find solutions to the question of the relationships between the Catholic teaching and the teaching of other religions. These two much debated issues are the question about faith and church's missionary mandate. If one subscribes to the 'Rahnerian' anonymous Christian thought, one should presume that anonymous Christians also have 'an anonymous faith'. Regarding the Church's mission, the dispute naturally concerns its necessity and validity.

their meaning from Christ's own mediation.<sup>17</sup> In Morali's critique, some theologians of a pluralistic orientation have too hastily drawn conclusions from this expression in thinking that here the pope has opened a new stage of dogmatic development. According to Morali, the meaning of the notion of "participated mediations" rests in the text of *Lumen gentium* 62, which discusses what role should be given to Mary in the economy of salvation. LG employs the terminology of "participated co-operation" (*cooperatio participata*) when speaking of the position of Mary in the economy of salvation.<sup>18</sup>

Morali admits that interpretation of the intention of the pope in this point is not easy. She argues that it is unclear as how to apply a "clearly Marian denomination" in the conciliar documents to non-Christian religions, which do not have a salvific position similar to that of Mary.<sup>19</sup>

If Morali's verdict is negative regarding Vatican II and the post-conciliar magisterial documents on the possible salvific value of other religions, how, then, does she understand the notions of the "Word of God", "Logos" and "seeds of the Word" in those documents? The idea of *Semina Verbi* is discussed twice in the Council documents.<sup>20</sup> In Morali's analysis, this expression is to be understood in the context of preparation for the gospel (*preparatio evangelica*). The divine seed waits to be watered in order that it bears fruit and grows. This is a progressive preparation for the coming of the Saviour, Christ. In this interpretation, there is no disunion or separation between the creator Word and the redeemer Word, the incarnate Christ. *Semina verbi*, therefore, cannot possess any salvific value unrelated to Christ. Consequently, the possible salvific elements in other cultures and religions serve only as "divine pedagogy" (*paedagogia divina*) and preparation for gospel, which needs perfection and fulfilment.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> RM 5.

<sup>18</sup> "For no creature could ever be counted as equal with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer. Just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by the ministers and by the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is really communicated in different ways to His creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source." LG 62. All of chapter 62 of LG examines the role of Mary. The Latin original reads: "ita etiam unica mediatio Redemptoris non excludit, sed suscitatur variam apud creaturas participatam ex unico fonte cooperationem."

<sup>19</sup> Morali 2010, 136-137.

<sup>20</sup> Ad gentes (AG) 11: *semina verbi latentia* and *Lumen gentium* (LG) 17, where the Council indirectly refers to antecedent in relation to the expression "Whatever good or true" (*quidquid boni et veri*) which is defined as *seminatum*.

<sup>21</sup> Morali 2010, 130-131. Morali is very positive in her stance. She finds no argument that justifies another interpretation in the Council's documents. It is not a task of this study to evaluate whether her elucidation of conciliar documents is correct in general. However, one may ask is her interpretation of those documents of the Council which speak about "religious attempts" (*incepta religiosa*, AG 13), "whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples" (LG 17) is quite accurate. Morali seems to draw a perhaps unnecessary distinction between a religion and religious attempts and actions. This sounds like a rather artificial distinction; can there normally be religious attempts and practices without a religion? She

As previously noted, other possible interpretations exist. For example, Jacques Dupuis interprets the teaching of Vatican II in a different way.<sup>22</sup> Dupuis makes clear that, when assessing the question of non-Christians and their religions, there are two matters that need to be distinguished. First, there is the question of the individual salvation of persons belonging to other religious traditions; second, there is the question of what possible significance these traditions as such might have in the salvation of their adherents. The answer to the first question was not a novelty; the possibility of salvation outside the Church had been recognised long before Vatican II. The second part of the question was more complex: do other religions serve as channels or stepping stones (“fulfilment theory”), as preparation for the gospel, or do they possibly have a more abiding role in the economy of salvation? Dupuis supposes that the council was not very eager to raise this question as a major issue on the council’s agenda. The reasons for this reluctance included the council’s standpoint which was primarily pastoral rather than dogmatic. Further, regarding relationships with other religions, the council intended to foster between them and the Church an attitude of mutual understanding, esteem, dialogue, and cooperation. Therefore, it was perhaps unnecessary to decide on one particular position in the debate on the theology of religions.<sup>23</sup> However, Dupuis analyses the conciliar documents in order to establish where the Church stands on the matter of possible salvation attributed to other religious traditions. He examines the same texts as Morali. On some points, Dupuis’s conclusions are similar to those of Morali.<sup>24</sup> A point of divergence with Morali comes in Dupuis’ discussion of *Nostra Aetate* 2, the text of which reads:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.

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stands for an interpretation of the conciliar texts which seeks to safeguard the interpretation of the Council (and post-conciliar development) as “not to feed the idea that other religions, beyond the Catholic religion, should be considered true.” Morali 2010, 130. In Morali’s interpretation there is therefore no room for relativism regarding salvation. See also e.g. Ruokanen (1992, 144 ), who seems to represent similar interpretation to that of Morali’s: “Although the Second Vatican Council demonstrated unforeseen openness to the progress and problems of the modern world, it did not make the least compromise in respect to the Catholic faith. All the good evolution in human culture, no matter whether it be secular or religious, is welcomed. But in spite of that, all developments need to be purified, strengthened, and elevated by the revealed divine truth, given to the world in Christ and incarnated and transmitted in his Church.”

Peter C. Phan 2004, 64, comments the Vatican II’s stand on possible salvation attained through other religions: “It must be pointed out the theory that non-Christian religions are “ways of salvation” cannot be taught as Christian doctrine, but it is at least a *sentential communis* and *theologice certa*, and certainly not *temeraria* and *scandalosa*.”

<sup>22</sup> E.g. Dupuis’ *Toward a Theology of Religious Pluralism* (2000).

<sup>23</sup> Dupuis 2000, 158.

<sup>24</sup> Dupuis 2000, 162-163.

Here Dupuis detects an implicit allusion to John 1:9.<sup>25</sup> Based on that, he argues that there is an incomplete but real presence of the truth in other religions which then guides the Church's attitude of respect toward them. This truth, nevertheless, requires the Church to proclaim the fullness of religious life in Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup> Dupuis admits that it is difficult to establish the council's mind with certainty; there is a positive tone regarding other religions in the conciliar documents Dupuis discuss, but in Dupuis' opinion, the council's doctrinal assessment also suffers from a certain vagueness.<sup>27</sup> Dupuis finds evidence to support his understanding in the 1994 *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (1994),<sup>28</sup> which reads:

This vision induced the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council to affirm that in the religious traditions of non-Christians there exist "elements which are true and good" (OT 16), "precious things, both religious and human" (GS 92); "seeds of contemplation" (AG 18), "elements of truth and grace" (AG 9), "seeds of the Word" (AG 11,15), and "rays of the truth which illumine all mankind" (NA 2). According to explicit conciliar indications, these values are found preserved in the great religious traditions of humanity. Therefore, they merit the attention and the esteem of Christians.<sup>29</sup>

Dupuis finds here an authoritative magisterial confirmation of his interpretation of the conciliar documents' positive affirmation of the presence of the truth and grace and seeds of the Word preserved in other religious traditions. This is a significant text; the concept "religious traditions" can certainly be read as acceptance of "truth and good" in other religions and in their structures. From this affirmation it is not a great leap to the acceptance of other religions as "graced" and as representatives of truth.

Dupuis also examines the question of the possibility of the acceptance of other religions as graced and as representatives of truth in other post-conciliar Church documents. According to Dupuis, the Council's documents leave a certain ambiguity in the air regarding the Church's position on other religions. Dupuis assesses this question as it was discussed during the pontificates of Paul VI and John Paul II.<sup>30</sup> Dupuis argues that Paul VI seemed clearly to maintain the fulfilment theory in its traditional pre-conciliar formulation, whereas John Paul II held a more positive view in his

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<sup>25</sup> "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world." (NIV)

<sup>26</sup> Dupuis 2000, 164.

<sup>27</sup> Dupuis 2000, 164.

<sup>28</sup> The text is found here: <http://www.cimer.org.au/documents/DialogueandMission1984.pdf> (accessed January 17, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Note that the first edition of Dupuis' book was published in 1997, during the pontificate of John Paul II.

emphasis on the universal, active presence of the Spirit of God and of Christ in various religious traditions themselves, which, in Dupuis's view, goes beyond the traditional fulfilment theory.<sup>31</sup>

The foregoing discussion of examples of the differing interpretations offered by Morali and Dupuis shows that the question of a Catholic theology of religions did not reach a decisive consensus in the council's documents. Interpretation of the same documents can yield both a very conservative outcome as well a more "progressive" outcome. The ongoing discussion on this question indicates that this issue was left open for further perusal and study.<sup>32</sup> This was exactly the situation in which the FABC was born and began to develop its Asian contextual theology in its search for truth which could be understood and expressed in an Asian-compatible manner. Where does the FABC stand on the question regarding the relationship between Gospel and other religions? The next subchapter will focus on this question, especially in the light of the concept of the "Word of God," and in the framework of Asian contextual realities.

#### 4.1.2. The "Word of God" in the Contextual Theology of the FABC

Above we discussed the question of the possible salvific value of other religions by means of analysis of the important concepts of "Word of God" and "seeds of the Word" (*Logos spermatikos*) as they appear in conciliar and post-conciliar documents. These concepts also appear often in the FABC documents. It thus appears that they are important indicators of how the FABC has applied the Church's teaching in contemporary Asian contexts. As the discussion above has shown, these important patristic theological concepts and their interpretation are of crucial significance in

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<sup>31</sup> Dupuis 2000, 170-179.

<sup>32</sup> Dupuis discusses different interpretations of Vatican II's understanding of possible salvific value of other religions. He presents four theologians, two of whom represent a minimalist appraisal of the council's doctrine in the matter, and two of whom see the council's stand in a more positive light. The two theologians in the "minimalist" position are P. Hacker (*Theological Foundations of Evangelization*, 1980) and Miikka Ruokanen (*The Catholic Doctrine on Non-Christian Religions According to the Second Vatican Council*, 1992). The other two, who in Dupuis's estimation belong to the more "optimistic" category, are P. Rossano (*Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism in Roman Catholic Perspective*, 1981) and K. Kunnumpuram (*Ways of Salvation: The Salvific Meaning of Non-Christian Religions according to the Teaching of Vatican II*, 1971). In Dupuis' view Hacker interprets the conciliar documents on other religions as referring only to the anthropological aspects of religion and remaining silent regarding the possibility of reaching the salvation through them. Ruokanen's interpretation is that the council's teaching is in line with the perfection of fulfilment theory. Dupuis cites Ruokanen: "...non-Christian religions do not add any supernatural dimension of revelation or grace to the natural condition of man." (Ruokanen 1992, 100). On the other side of the spectrum in Dupuis' discussion introduction is Rossano, who asserts that there is no doubt that grace and truth reach the hearts of men and women through the visible, experiential signs of the various religions. Kunnumpuram argues that there are positive values in the traditions themselves: in their doctrines, rites, rule of life. They reflect truth and grace, which are supernatural gifts of God, a sort of secret presence of God, the work of Christ who is the true light and the seeds of the Word. Dupuis 2000, 165-168.



appraising the relationship of Christian revelation to other religions and cultures. In what way do the Asian bishops employ these important theological terms that seem to be of great importance as the FABC characterises its contextual theology in the midst of Asian cultural milieus?

The presence of the Word of God in the created world is based not merely on its pre-existence and its role in Creation. The decisive “entry point” into history is the Incarnation. The FABC’s 1979 Mission Congress emphasises the transformative power of the Word of God which became flesh in Jesus Christ and continues to incarnate itself in cultures. This process is called inculturation, whereby

[A] people receives the Word, makes it the principle of their life, values, attitudes and aspirations. ... The Word, discovered anew in and freed from its historical embodiments, becomes relevant to the life of the community here and now ... The community discovers a new identity, losing nothing of its cultural riches, but integrating them in a new whole ... The Word remains the inner principle of the unity amidst the enriching multiplicity of forms in which the creative Spirit gave its expression.<sup>34</sup>

Here, the incarnation is emphasised because of its paradigmatic significance for inculturation. In the birth of a “new” and “relevant” reality, the Word constitutes the inner principle. What is the chief motivation behind this “existential” interpretation of the significance of the Word and its incarnation? One clue is found in the quote above: “The Word...freed from its historical embodiments becomes relevant.” A thrust to make the Gospel relevant and accessible to Asian contexts clearly appears here. Again, the main connecting link to the standard Christian tradition is found in the concept “Word of God” as “the inner principle of the unity” which in this text seems to indicate a process of reading, proclaiming, listening to and practicing the Word of God.

The Word is also the defining principle which holds the Church together. When one reads this FABC document, it is easy to imagine a kind of widening process in which the Word sends the Church into a dialogical process in which the Church becomes more incarnate and more fully present in a local context. This widening circle can also be understood as a process or pilgrimage, both of which are frequent concepts in the FABC documents. This pilgrimage leads to a fuller understanding and expression of truth. Through this process the Church is also capable of fulfilling its mission in the world. For the FABC, incarnation is also a continuous process: “The Word of God which became flesh (cf. Jn 1:14) in Jesus Christ, continues to incarnate itself in the cultures of the peoples it encounters, transforming them in the power of the Spirit and leading them to the universal fullness of the new creation (cf. Eph. 1:10).”<sup>35</sup> Here the document employs the important theological concept *incarnatio continua* ‘continuing incarnation’. This means that while it does not

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<sup>34</sup> International Congress on Mission I.2, FAPA 1, 138.

<sup>35</sup> International Congress on Mission I.1., FAPA 1, 138.

question the significance of the historical incarnation, when approaching Asian contexts the FABC underscores the continuous incarnation of the Word as a transformative power. This process constitutes a dynamic process, which is not closed but rather provides a future open to possibilities.

In this process the Word is discovered anew and freed from its “historical embodiments”.<sup>36</sup> What do the Asian bishops mean by historical embodiments of the Word which, as they argue, have become an obstacle for a successful incarnation of the Christian Gospel in Asia? Quite obviously they refer to those parts of history and structures that have kept the Christian gospel alien to Asia. Therefore, it is clear that the FABC is critical of how the Christian faith had been introduced in Asia. These questions were discussed above where I paid attention to the issues of foreignness versus Asianness of the Christian Gospel in Asia.<sup>37</sup> Here I will examine the way in which the FABC view the role of history, especially salvation history. In the context of interreligious dialogue the FIRA writes:

The history of humanity is the history of revelation. As Christians we have access to this divine presence in history through the person and event of Jesus Christ. In Christ we recognise the incarnational, decisive and definitive entry of the Divine into the world. This faith in Christ is not a judgement on other religions. While sharing our experience of Christ with others we must be careful to avoid using exclusive language or to make normative claims. The servant image of Jesus speaks better to the heart of Asia. In him we recognise the face of God who suffers with us and the power of God who re-creates life.<sup>38</sup>

When addressing the Asian Catholic bishops in 1993, Cardinal Ratzinger warned of an ahistorical faith.<sup>39</sup> In his analysis of other cultures and religions, Ratzinger acknowledges that in them is found “the knowledge of man's dependence on God and eternity, the knowledge of sin, repentance and forgiveness, the knowledge of communion with God and eternal life, and finally the knowledge of basic moral precepts as they have taken shape in the Decalogue, all this knowledge permeates the

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<sup>36</sup> “The Word, discovered anew in and freed from its limited historical embodiments, becomes relevant to the life of the community here and now, giving a new orientation and a fresh challenge and dynamism in meeting its life problems.” International Congress on Mission, I.3., FAPA 1, 138. Cooper (2013, 124-125) discusses the concept of *incarnatio continua* in the writings of Meister Eckhart: “Central to Eckhartian spirituality is an understanding of the Christian doctrine of Incarnation as *incarnatio continua*, or incarnation as an ongoing process that all of humanity is undergoing since Christ. ...Christ is not a stage of history of salvation but rather the salvational inner structure of history. This inner structure is at the same time dynamic and perpetually present: *creatio* and *incarnatio continua*. Incarnation is the epitome of historicity. --- *Incarnatio continua*, therefore, is also an ongoing process rife with potentially creative tension for the human subject, who becomes aware of his or her participation in it.” Adiprasetya (2013, 24, n. 58) finds the notion in the theology of Raimundo Panikkar. Adiprasetya contends that Panikkar maintains the necessity of seeing the incarnation as continuous event to support his understanding that every being, not merely human beings, are Christophanies, the continuous incarnation of the Son in every creature.

<sup>37</sup> See chapter 2.1.

<sup>38</sup> FIRA IV 16., FAPA 3, 143.

<sup>39</sup> “Faith is not a private way to God; it leads into the people of God and its history. God bound himself to a history which is now also his and one which we cannot cast off.” Ratzinger 1993, 10.

cultures.”<sup>40</sup> These are natural attributes, but not enough to attain salvation. Other religions need to understand their preparatory role and their need be propelled forward to Christ. Christ and Christianity, together with its history, become normative for all religions and cultures. Whatever good and truthful is found in other religions, nevertheless stands in need of purification and awaits fulfilment in Christ.<sup>41</sup> In the Church’s official teaching Christ, the Word of God - or Logos, is found in the Christ event, in Christ incarnate, crucified and risen, to whom the Church testifies. These give the Church and its history a distinct and decisive role. Thus, Ratzinger evaluates the history of the Church and its missionary enterprises in a positive light.<sup>42</sup>

The Office of Evangelisation of the FABC, however, provides a different interpretation of the question addressed by Ratzinger. The OTC argues that the Church has been, and is, foreign in its lifestyle, its structures and even in its theological approach.<sup>43</sup> The incompatibility of the Christian faith in its western form implies that the Word of God does not bear fruit as it should. Christ remains very much un-incarnate. It seems that a point of divergence between the Asian bishops and the magisterium lies primarily in the ways in which the gospel has been introduced and presented in Asia. It is easy to see that the FABC does not question the uniqueness of Jesus as the Saviour<sup>44</sup>, but rather the OE questions way how in which Jesus is presented in Asia. This tension again reveals the basic question of the present study: how the FABC manages to build a bridge between the teaching of the universal Church and its meaningful, Asian-compatible form. The concept ‘Word of God’ and its variations are operative terms in this endeavour.

It is apparent that in the FABC documents the notion “Word of God” is interpreted very broadly; in order to contextualise the Church and its message in Asian contexts in the best possible way, the FABC’s fourth Plenary Assembly attempted to further push the limits of this decisive notion: “We

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<sup>40</sup> Ratzinger 1993, 19.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., *Nostra Aetate* (NA) 2: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”

<sup>42</sup> Ratzinger 1993, 2, expresses his dissatisfaction with the opinion which does not see the history of mission as the history of diffusion of truth and love but as a history of alienation and violation.

<sup>43</sup> “The Church remains foreign in its lifestyle, in its institutional structure, in its worship, in its western trained leadership and in its theology. Christian rituals often remain formal, neither spontaneous nor particularly Asian.” OE 13, FAPA 2, 195.

<sup>44</sup> “We have to proclaim him as the Son of God, the unique Saviour of the world, the One who beyond human dreams fulfils the deepest yearnings of the Asian heart. We are convinced that the Good News of Jesus that we bear is our most precious gift to Asia.” OE 4, FAPA 4, 250. In this context one can perhaps ask if the term “unique” is synonymous with the terms such as “sole”, “only” and the like.

need to listen to Christ as the Word, in the Scriptures and in the Church, but we need also to listen to the Word in persons and in events, in the ebb and flow of life.”<sup>45</sup> Here the presence of the Christ is actualised in current life situations, in the actions of listening and discerning. The FABC’s theology emphasises the actual context so much that it becomes a source of revelation rather than being simply a background against which the gospel message is reflected upon and then applied. The Office for Theological Concerns writes:

Traditionally, the use of contextual realities meant that the context was the background against which one did theology. This background was the people, their culture, religion, history and struggles. The faith or the Gospel and tradition must address the questions and challenges thrown up by the context and respond to them. This kind of theology was concerned with the ways of adapting and applying the message to people in their concrete socio-religio-cultural situations.

Today “context” has a new meaning and perspective. Context, or contextual realities, are considered resources of theology (*loci theologici*) together with the Christian sources of Scripture and Tradition.<sup>46</sup>

In this significant passage, the words “traditionally” and “today” call for attention. We suggest that the OTC sees the importance of being (in a certain way) progressive while maintaining the intention to remain traditional. A crucial question, therefore, is that of the interpretation of the Christian tradition in new contexts.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, this definition provides a broader meaning to context and contextual realities than simply that of a background. This also brings with it a new method of doing theology in Asia. The FABC documents affirm this explicitly when they accept contextual realities as “*loci theologici* together with the Christian sources of Scripture and Tradition.”<sup>48</sup> This new method of doing theology in Asia embraces contextual realities nearly on a par with the traditional sacred deposit of the Word of God, Scripture and Tradition. The criterion for their use is that contextual realities are resources of theology, and thus bearers of Word of God, “insofar as they embody and manifest the presence of God and his Spirit.”<sup>49</sup> This presence is thus recognised “through discernment and interpretation.”<sup>50</sup> The OTC is aware that this discernment and interpretation of the presence of God and God’s Spirit require theological criteria.<sup>51</sup> This assessment and discernment takes place as the OTC analyses the identified contextual resources one by one. How does this assessment and discernment happen?

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<sup>45</sup> FABC 4, 4.8.5., FAPA 1, 196.

<sup>46</sup> OTC Methodology, 3.1., FAPA 3, 356.

<sup>47</sup> See the discussion of Pilario above, page 87.

<sup>48</sup> OTC Methodology 3.1.2., FAPA 3, 356.

<sup>49</sup> OTC Methodology 3.1.2., FAPA 3, 356.

<sup>50</sup> OTC Methodology 3.1.2., FAPA 3, 356.

<sup>51</sup> “This [presence] is recognised through discernment and interpretation. It calls for theological criteria to recognise and assess the loci. This will be taken up below.” OTC Methodology 3.1.2., FAPA 3, 356.

#### 4.1.3. Criteria for Assessment the Presence of the Word of God in Contextual Realities

First, one key for assessing the *loci*, the contextual resources, is their use in correlation with the Bible and the Tradition of the Church.<sup>52</sup> In the view of the Federation, “[u]se of these resources implies a tremendous change in theological methodology.”<sup>53</sup> “The totality of life is the raw material of theology; God is redemptively present in the totality of human life.”<sup>54</sup>

However, using contextual realities in correlation with the Bible and the Tradition of the Church shows that contextual realities are not to be considered a *depositum fidei* in the same sense as Scripture and Tradition, but rather as secondary and supplementary resources that make the gospel and the Church’s tradition more compatible and understandable in Asia. As such they are indispensable material for analysing the contextual theology of the FABC. What is it, theologically speaking, that makes contextual realities *loci theologici* and what their relationship is to Scripture and Tradition, is clarified by the Office of Theological Concerns: “Based on these Christian Sources [Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture] one reflects on the new resources of cultures, religions, peoples, their history, struggles, movements, their sufferings and hopes, as well as economic and political realities and sees in them the action of the Spirit.”<sup>55</sup>

The OTC therefore argues that traditional Christian sources are to be brought into interaction with contextual realities, which are regarded as new resources for theology. An important criterion for accepting them as resources is the action of the Spirit recognisable in them.<sup>56</sup> These contextual realities are accepted as matter for theology *in so far as* they contain God’s presence, his Word or his Spirit.<sup>57</sup> This quality is recognised through discernment, in light of the specific Christian revelation, the Bible and Tradition.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “Doing Theology in an Asian context means taking into account contextual realities as resources of theology. Methodologically these enter into a theology done in a given situation. As Christians, we rely first on the Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture which form the one sacred deposit of the Word of God (Dei Verbum 10). The teaching office of the Church .... has the task of authentically interpreting the deposit of the Word of God in Spirit ... However, as Asian Christians, we do theology together with Asian realities as resources in so far as we discern in them God’s presence, action and work of the Spirit. We use these resources in correlation with the Bible and the Tradition of the Church.” OTC Methodology 3.1., FAPA 3, 355

<sup>53</sup> OTC Methodology 3.1, FAPA 3, 355.

<sup>54</sup> OTC Methodology 3.1., FAPA 3, 356. “The cultures of peoples, the history of their struggles, their religions, their religious scriptures, oral traditions, popular religiosity, economic and political realities and world events, historical personages, stories of oppressed people crying for justice, freedom, dignity, life, and solidarity become resources of theology, and assume methodological importance in our context.” OTC Methodology 3.1, FAPA 3, 355-356.

<sup>55</sup> OTC Methodology 3.4., FAPA 3, 363.

<sup>56</sup> OTC Methodology 3.4., FAPA 3, 363.

<sup>57</sup> OTC Methodology 3.1., FAPA 3, 355. Emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup> “We use these resources in correlation with the Bible and the Tradition of the Church.” OTC Methodology 3.1., FAPA 3, 355.

This approach is further affirmed by the OTC as it continues by stating that, based on faith, it is obvious that God's Spirit is active in creation and in human history.<sup>59</sup> This means that God's presence encompasses all dimensions of life and leads it to transformation and redemption. It is precisely this presence and action of God and His Spirit which makes contextual realities theological resources. In addition and importantly, the OTC also brings to this context the "presence of rays of truth, elements of holiness, "germinative words" (*logoi spermatikoi*) and the fruits of the Spirit in other religions and cultures, events social and religious [that] are accepted in the documents of the Church."<sup>60</sup> Moreover, God's Spirit sows the seeds of the Word in peoples' customs and cultures and so prepares "them for the fullness of the Gospel."<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, these contextual realities as theological *loci* are then brought to the enterprise of theology together with explicitly Christian sources. These latter guide the Asian theological enterprise, although not exclusively.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Asian contextual realities play an indispensable role in this process. This approach leads the FABC's theology into "new frontiers of theology – the history of Asian Peoples".<sup>63</sup> The OTC stresses this particular point to the extent that they themselves ask what is it in the Christian tradition that constitutes the theological basis for accepting contextual realities as theological *loci*. The OTC names two reasons for this acceptance: the first is that the whole universe is a manifestation of God's glory and goodness. Second, because they hold that God did not merely create the universe, but also through the Spirit, God is actively present in it and in human history, leading all to God's Kingdom, God's presence and grace can be encountered in these realities.<sup>64</sup>

Hence, very important theological points emerge from this text. The new resources of cultures, religions, peoples, their history, struggles, movements, their sufferings and hopes as well as economic and political realities, are interpreted in the light of creation. There is only one, all-encompassing salvific will of God which is meant for the whole world and cosmos. Christian faith guides to see God's glory and goodness in the entire universe. The history of humankind and people's everyday life events, i.e., their contexts, are "venues" for God's saving action in this world.

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<sup>59</sup> OTC Methodology 3.4., FAPA 3, 363

<sup>60</sup> OTC Methodology 3.4., FAPA 3, 364.

<sup>61</sup> OTC Methodology 3.4., FAPA 3, 364.

<sup>62</sup> OTC Methodology 3.4., FAPA 3, 363-364

<sup>63</sup> OTC Methodology 3.4., FAPA 3, 363-364.

<sup>64</sup> OTC Methodology 3.4., FAPA 3, 364. After this quote the document also refers to the presence of *logoi spermatikoi* in other religions, cultures and social and religious events, as accepted in the official documents of the Church.

Ostensibly the concept “Word of God” and other terms related to it, such as “Logos”, and “seeds of the Word” (*Logoi spermatikoi*) occupy an important hermeneutical location in the FABC’s contextual theology. The Word, or seeds of the Word, serves as a bridge from the Christian tradition to local contexts, and also vice versa. Recognition of the Word of God in cultures, religious traditions and the “ebb and flow of the life of peoples” provides a dialogical, amicable approach for the Church as it attempts to address its own peoples and cultures in Asia. The FABC does not question the centrality of the Christian revelation, especially the Christ-event (– his historical incarnation and the paschal mystery-), but their weight and therefore importance in the FABC’s theology is brought to bear on the task of constructing an Asian-compatible theology. The historical incarnation of Christ serves as a model for how the Christian message should be presented in today’s world. But the very same Christ, who was born 2000 years ago, is discernible through his seeds in today’s world, outside the confines of the specifically Christian tradition as well. This articulation suggests that the presence of the Word outside the specifically Christian revelation is substantially same as in the Christ-event. Truth and goodness in other religions and cultures are always oriented towards the Word, or his seeds (Logos), which became fully visible in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In addition, in the FABC’s theology the pre-incarnation, creation-bound Logos, or seeds of the Logos, are always related to the Logos which became incarnate in Jesus Nazareth. Thus, it seems, there is no separation between them, but only a temporary distinction of appearances.

The importance of this understanding of the Word of God shows that it constitutes a major theological foundation as the FABC approaches the contexts of its own peoples. After discussing and elaborating upon the matter at considerable length, the FABC appears to be of the opinion that there exists much substantial goodness in Asian contextual realities, on account of creation and the ongoing presence of the Spirit.

This analysis shows that the notion of the Word of God and its seeds in the instances discussed above serve the FABC’s attempt to explicate its positive approach to Asian religions. The presence of the Word in this particular contextual reality (Asian religions) serves as the basic argument for that. It seems that the notion of the Word of God with its different variations serves as a *terminus technicus* by means of which the FABC explains and justifies theologically an amicable approach to Asian contextual realities while, at the same time, attempting to preserve intact the genuine Catholic

faith. The 'Word of God' discerned and experienced in Asian contextual realities is therefore a 'bridge-building' term in the FABC's thought.

A new contextual theology compatible with Asia is constructed by integrating Asian *loci theologici* into theology together with specifically Christian sources. Here, the concepts of integration and discernment are key terms. They describe the process in which the traditional Christian sources are brought into dialogue with Asian contextual theological loci. This sends the Asian pilgrim Church into a movement in which it ventures into new frontiers of theology. This shows the theological methodology of the Asian bishops in practice. Both the deductive and inductive aspects of the bishops methodology are in dialogical and integral communion with each another. These are important observations for understanding the contextual theology of the Asian bishops.

Theologically, the FABC therefore accepts that God's plan for the whole world is confined not merely to the Christian dispensation but that is also discernible through creation and the entire human history, a view based especially on the presence and action of the Logos and of the Spirit's presence in history. Precisely this is the reason why the Asian bishops include Asian contextual realities as the raw material of theology. They are not merely a background against which God's salvific plan takes place, but God also reveals Godself in and through them.

This new understanding of context will of course bring both new challenges and opportunities to Asian contextual theology. Specifically, what are the criteria for the assessment of the relationship between theological loci? The next subchapter will analyse what the relationship is between the two traditional theological loci of Scripture and Tradition and the third locus, Asian contextual realities: cultural resources, religious resources and specific social movements, including especially the reality of the Asian poor.<sup>65</sup> For the sake of clarity these three realities will be studied separately, although in many FABC documents they are addressed in the same texts. In addition, the FABC

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<sup>65</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2, FAPA 3, 356-362. Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) has produced a profound document on the title Methodology: Asian Christian Theology in FAPA 3, 329-419. It is a theologically extensive and rich piece of work which provides a researcher invaluable material in establishing FABC's theological thinking. Elsewhere, in several places FABC uses the expression 'triple dialogue' with Asian religions, cultures and the poor. The dialogical approach surfaces already in FABC's first Plenary Assembly (1974), where two dialogue partners, i.e., Asian religions and the poor, are explicitly mentioned. Also a need to make the Church incarnated and inculturated in local cultures of Asia reflects a dialogical attitude towards the cultures. FABC 1, IV-V, FAPA 1, 14-16. On 'Triple dialogue' as a way to make the Church truly local see OE, Theological Consultation 15, FAPA 2, 196; TAC, Harmony 6, FAPA 2, 285-286; FIRA IV 7, FAPA 3, 141; FABC-OSC, 3.1, FAPA 3, 167; FIRA V 9, FAPA 4, 199.



itself repeatedly mentions them as the principal contextual realities. Therefore they all merit studying one by one.

## **4.2. The FABC in Dialogue with Asian Religions**

Because Asia is the cradle of all major world religions, and because of their continuous presence in Asia, within which Christianity is but a minority, the Asian Church cannot bypass these religions in its theological construction. Asian religions are accepted as a contextual reality and as such are also a resource for theology. Hence, the FABC acknowledges the positive value of other religions.

However, it is important to examine what the FABC thinks about the possible significance of other religions in God's economy of salvation. If the FABC argues that Asia's other religions are indeed not simply existing realities (*de facto*) but also willed by God (*de iure*), what is the role of the religions after the arrival of Christian proclamation and faith? Here we will discuss the question about the possible fulfilment of other religions by the Christian gospel. Finally, where does the FABC stand on the delicate question of the various positions within the theology of religions: do the Asian bishops represent exclusivism, inclusivism or pluralism, or is this kind of categorisation meaningful and accurate at all in the case of the FABC's contextual theology?

### **4.2.1. Other Religions: Existing *de facto* or *de iure*?**

It is clear that from the beginning of the existence of the FABC, the Asian bishops regarded other religions in a positive light. The first instance of this appears in the 1974 statement of the first Plenary Assembly. The meeting declares: "In this dialogue we accept them [other religions] as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. ... How can we not give them reverence and honour? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?"<sup>66</sup> Thus, it seems that from their very first meeting as the FABC

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<sup>66</sup> FABC 1, 14-15, FAPA 1, 14.

the Asian bishops acknowledge other religions as belonging to God's plan. What causes the FABC to acknowledge this?

One answer lies in the history and experience of Asian peoples. These religions contain the religious experience of the ancestors, from which the present generation draws light and strength. They are an authentic expression of the noblest longings and the home of contemplation and prayer. Moreover, they have helped in shaping histories and cultures.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, they are said to be part of culture, and in Asia they have been the doorway to God.<sup>68</sup>

It is interesting to note that the FABC highly value Asian histories, cultures and religions. As the bishops say, in some respect, they contain God's revelation. In addition, history itself proves that there is much goodness in Asian religions.

Another representative text affirming this positive stand is the year 2000 text in which the Office for Theological Concerns (OTC) writes: "This salvific plan explains the presence of God's saving grace in religions, cultures, movements, history of peoples, their struggles."<sup>69</sup> The predecessor of the OTC, the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) of the FABC, further explicates the positive role of other religions in the economy of salvation. They write: "Its experience of the other religions has led the Church in Asia to this positive appreciation of their role in the economy of salvation. This appreciation is based on the fruits of the Spirit in the lives of other religions' believers ... This positive recognition is further rooted in the conviction of faith that God's plan of salvation for humanity is one and reaches out to all peoples..."<sup>70</sup>

Thus, apart from historical evidence of the goodness in Asian religions, their value is also theological, based on the presence and work of the Spirit in them. These together indicate God's plan of salvation for all humanity.

Therefore, the question of whether other religions' existence is acknowledged only *de facto* as existing realities, or instead in principle, as a part of God's will (*de iure*) and plan, is explicitly answered in the cited text above: they are positive elements in God's salvation economy. They are willed by God.<sup>71</sup> This stance is further affirmed by The Office of Evangelization of the FABC:

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<sup>67</sup> "They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations." FABC 1, 14, FAPA 1, 14.

<sup>68</sup> FABC 1, II.12, FAPA 1, 22-23.

<sup>69</sup> OTC Methodology 3.4., FAPA 3, 364. In this context the OTC document also refers to *Ad gentes* and Pope John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio*. The OTC argues that both magisterial documents support the universal salvific will of God.

<sup>70</sup> TAC, Theses on Interreligious Dialogue 2.2.-2.3 ([http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc\\_paper\\_48.pdf](http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc_paper_48.pdf))

<sup>71</sup> See also e.g. in a Theological Advisory Commission document: "...God's life-giving Spirit is at work beyond Christian communities, in whatever is good and true (see *Lumen Gentium*, no. 16; *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2), in other religions and religious traditions." TAC, Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 4.3., FAPA 2, 278. "Our faith in Jesus

“These [Asian religious traditions] are expressions of the presence of God’s Word and of the universal action of his Spirit in them.”<sup>72</sup>

The fact that the Asian bishops seem to embrace other existing religions not merely as an existing fact, (*de facto*) but also *de iure* (willed by God) has drawn the attention of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF). This is evident in this passage of *Dominus Iesus* (DI):

The Church's constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure* (or in principle). As a consequence, it is held that certain truths have been superseded; for example, the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, the nature of Christian faith as compared with that of belief in other religions, the inspired nature of the books of Sacred Scripture, the personal unity between the Eternal Word and Jesus of Nazareth, the unity of the economy of the Incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit, the unicity and salvific universality of the mystery of Jesus Christ, the universal salvific mediation of the Church, the inseparability — while recognizing the distinction — of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Christ, and the Church, and the subsistence of the one Church of Christ in the Catholic Church.<sup>73</sup>

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as the Christ does not require the expulsion of saviour figures of other religions, nor does it deny the salvific value of other religions.” FIRA II, 3.4., FAPA 3, 128.

Answer to the question whether other religions exist only *de facto*, or *de iure*, willed by God, is important when examining other religions as possible means of salvation. The FABC is explicit in affirming the *de iure* character of other religions. This particular question has evoked critical reactions from the Vatican. For example, *Dominus Iesus* – declaration directly criticises the acceptance of the *de iure* character of other religions. (DI 4) The Declaration seems to accept that there are valuable elements in other religions (see DI 14), but the position of other religions as vehicles for salvation is questionable. The very question about whether the Asian bishops accept other religions as vehicles of salvation *per se* or only as containing good and valuable elements contributing to salvation but yet waiting for purification, perfection and fulfilment is disputed among scholars. In his dissertation (1997, 122-136), Bula argues that the FABC subscribes the fulfilment paradigm. Bula is obviously worried about the positions of certain Asian theologians, who he sees as to be too closely aligned with a pluralistic paradigm and who compromise the uniqueness of Christ. Bula’s argumentation, however, is regrettably quite heavily built upon extra-FABC sources. Therefore one gets the impression that his intention is safeguarding the orthodoxy of the Asian bishops in this regard. Jonathan Tan holds that, for the Asian bishops, other religions are salvific as such as expressions of Asian religious plurality as willed by God. Bula clearly supports a more exclusivist model in lamenting the position of certain Asian theologians and clearly wishes to safeguard the orthodoxy of the Asian bishops in this regard. By doing this he does not do justice to the real intention of the FABC as the bishops “move into new frontiers of theology” (OTC Methodology 3.4. FAPA 3, 363).

<sup>72</sup> OE Theological Consultation 43, FAPA 1, 344. For a succinct discussion of the FABC’s discussion of religious pluralism, see Tan, 2002, 262-266.

<sup>73</sup> DI 4. Mannion (2008, 126-153) argues that three documents promulgated by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) are related. These three are *Communio in notio* (1992), *Dominus Iesus* (2000) and *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church* (2007). These documents, especially *Dominus Iesus*, “represented a definitive expression of a campaign to ‘restore’ an emphasis on the centrality of certain Christian interpretations of divine revelation in the salvific economy.” (Mannion 2007, 128) Its prime target is said to be religious relativism which regards all religions as equally valid ways of salvation. Mannion further argues that the document begins in a Vatican II –style positive tone but that soon its emphasis switches from a dialogical approach back to evangelisation. Mannion cites *Dominus Iesus* §22 where the role of the Church is said to be bringing the truth *ad gentes*. He posits that many commentators on *Dominus Iesus* saw the document making a swift from ecumenical thinking and the spirit of dialogue at Vatican II and also that of Pope Paul VI and even Pope John Paul II. Mannion argues that this swift is visible in the different tone of *Dominus Iesus* from that of *Dialogue and Mission* (1984) and *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991). Mannion further states that *Dominus Iesus* was a frequent topic of discussion in ecclesiological circles. One item discussed was the question about the order of priority between the local and the universal Church. Cardinal Walter Kasper is mentioned as being supportive of the local Church by asserting that “a local Church is not a province or department of the universal Church: it is rather the Church in that particular

Thus, juxtaposition of the above FABC texts and this passage from *Dominus Iesus* seems to clearly indicate that, in the opinion of the Congregation for the Doctrine and Faith, the view of the OTC and the TAC, in accepting other religions *expressis verbis* as existing not merely *de facto* but also *de iure*, willed by God, the FABC is at risk of lapsing into a relativistic understanding of the relationship between the Christian faith and other religions.<sup>74</sup> Comparison of these two different positions shows that a tension exists between them. The FABC appears to be more accepting towards other religions positive value than the CDF is ready to be.

Above, we saw that the FABC views other religions in a predominantly positive light, due to the historical evidence of “goodness” they have managed to produce and also because of the presence of the Logos and the Spirit of God in them. The first Plenary Assembly of the FABC sheds more light on this stance as it discusses the presence of the seeds of the Word of God in them: “Only in dialogue with these religions [of Asia] can we discover in them the seeds of the Word of God.”<sup>75</sup> This statement contains a direct reference to *Ad gentes* 9.<sup>76</sup> The conciliar constitution, however, does not use the definite term of “seed(s) of the Word” in this place, although the expression is found elsewhere in the document. *Ad gentes* 9 reads:

But whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God, He frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its maker, who overthrows the devil's domain and

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place”, whereas Cardinal Avery Dulles supported the priority of the universal Church over the local. (Mannion 2008, 135). Mannion’s discussion is interesting as it reveals quite great ambiguity on ecclesiology which remained and persisted in the Catholic Church after Vatican II. As for the ‘Responses’ (2007) of the CDF, Mannion (2008, 144) contends that it follows the same *modus operandi* as *Dominus Iesus*: “The document is at pains to assert that Vatican II did not ‘change the Catholic doctrine on the Church’ and it offers selective citation and interpretation of various Vatican II documents and papal addresses to support such a claim. But the key point to note here is that such documents and addresses are read very much through the ecclesologically tinted spectacles of much later and more recent CDF and papal documents concerning the doctrine of the church ... thereby removing much of the novelty and genuine change in ecclesial self-understanding that was heralded as the achievement of the Vatican II documents and papal pronouncements of the 1960s and early 1970s.”

<sup>74</sup> Chia (2012, 30) provides an interesting discussion of the “problem” of Asian theologies in relation to the teaching of Church authorities. Chia mentions Cardinal Josef Tomko (the prefect of the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples), who in 1991 had hinted that interreligious dialogue was leading towards doctrinal confusion, and that India was its epicentre and Asia its principal area. Cardinal Ratzinger had voiced similar concerns in his address to the presidents of the FABC member conferences, explicitly referring to Raimon Panikkar’s phrase: “Jesus is Christ, Christ is not (only) Jesus.” Finally Chia cites Cardinal Edward Cassidy, who *expressis verbis* declared: “Above all, it [Dominus Iesus] was directed to theology professors of India, because in Asia there is a theological problem over the oneness of salvation.” C.f. D’Costa (2010, 338) on Panikkar: “Panikkar typically wants to hold a robustly orthodox Christology that Jesus *is* the Logos incarnate, for he has no desire to dilute or water down central confessions of the faith. However, he also wants to steer clear of some of the questionable implications read into this that are not necessary. First, he rejects that the Logos is restricted to Jesus Christ, which for this makes the incarnation subject to a type of Christo-idolatry. This is the danger of exclusivism. Second, that all salvation comes from the historical Jesus Christ, such that the other religions cannot be “saving” in any way.” (emphasis in original)

<sup>75</sup> FABC I, 16, FAPA 1, 14.

<sup>76</sup> *Ad gentes* (AG)I, 9.

wards off the manifold malice of vice. And so, whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted, and perfected for the glory of God.

The passage from *Ad gentes* affirms that there is truth and grace as a hidden presence of God among the nations, by virtue of creation. This hidden presence needs only restoration and perfection. The specific expression “in the rites and cultures” can be interpreted to denote religious practices of other religions and cultures. However, it is open to discussion whether the Council includes other religions *per se* in the “good” present “in the rites and cultures”. Perhaps the Council fathers’ understanding is that the “whatever good” indicates only those elements that are present in these religions and cultures, not the religions and cultures *in toto*.<sup>77</sup> This understanding would imply that the Council assesses these in a positive light, but also as in need of healing and perfection.<sup>78</sup>

The FABC, however, has gone a step further in affirming that, through dialogue with other religions, the Church can receive specific things from them, even though some elements of them need purification and healing.<sup>79</sup> Thus, the Church no longer merely gives, but the Church also receives from other religions and cultures.

Here one can clearly see also the FABC’s methodological approach to other religions; the Church needs to be in dialogue with them, and in dialogue both partners are supposed to give and receive. This also implies that other religions can actually add something substantial to the Church’s own understanding of God’s salvific plan. Hence, the Church, even though it has been entrusted with the *depositum fidei*, is not the sole possessor of truth.

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<sup>77</sup> Morali (2010, 129-130) argues that in *Ad gentes* 9 “whatever truth and grace” the accent is social; it refers to peoples. She further maintains that when, for example, *Lumen gentium* (LG) 16 speaks about “whatever is good and true”, the document refers to persons, and that LG 17’s “whatever is true” refers to the hearts, minds, rites and cultures of peoples. Morali identifies only one conciliar text which speaks expressly of religions: *Nostra Aetate* (NA) 2, which accepts that there are elements of the true and holy in other religions. However, in Morali’s reading, in NA 2 as well the Council fathers wanted to recognise positive elements of other religions but only as *paedagogia in Christum*. Generally, the word “rite” (*ritus*) signifies a religious act or function, or even a whole series of religious acts. See Fortescue on rites at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13064b.htm> (accessed March 8, 2017)

<sup>78</sup> Certain vagueness on the part of the Vatican II documents is understandable in light of the pastoral, not dogmatic character of the Council. Also, the Council perhaps did not want to make the question of the salvific character of non-Christian religions a major issue of the Council. However, the pastoral approach of Vatican II does not mean that the council fathers were indifferent to the importance of the Church’s teaching. See my discussion above on D’Costa’s argument of how both the Second Vatican Council and specific papal documents of Pope John Paul II are intentionally silent on the possibility of attaining salvation through other religions, p. 96.

<sup>79</sup> FABC 1, 17, FAPA 1, 15: “Finally, this dialogue will teach us what our faith in Christ leads us to receive from these religious traditions, and what must be purified in them, healed and made whole, in the light of God’s Word.”

Summing up the teaching of the Asian bishops so far, we can say it is possible to conclude that God's all-encompassing salvific will for the entire created universe and cosmos will only be understood through mutual dialogue and enrichment among different religions.

If this position holds true, it brings another important question to the fore: does the validity and efficacy of other religions remain even after the arrival of the Christian faith? This would imply that the validity of other religions as means of salvation and as willed by God does not cease to exist after the arrival of Christianity. The FABC sources do not say much about this question.

Nevertheless, enough material exists to suggest at least a tentative position. As the 2004 Fifth Formation Institute of Religious Affairs (FIRA V) puts it: "These religions enrich the Church as much as the Church enriches them. Together they are journeying on a pilgrimage where the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of justice, peace and love, is the end goal."<sup>80</sup>

This text explicitly notes the concept of mutual enrichment. Thus, this theological approach is based on dialogue, which the FIRA interprets as maintaining the renewal inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council.<sup>81</sup> This argument is another example of the FABC's theological position: they regard their position as a reception and interpretation of the Vatican II explications applied contextually in Asia. Yet another affirmation of the resoundingly positive significance of other religions in the economy of salvation appears in 1994 Faith Encounters in Social Action (FEISA) meeting (under the auspices of the Office of Human Development (OHD)). A document of the meeting states that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Moreover, FEISA describes faith as the spiritual pilgrimage with sisters and brothers of Asian religions in pursuit of being one in Divine Life.<sup>82</sup> The FEISA meeting also argues that this aspect of pilgrimage resonates with the Asian psyche.<sup>83</sup> Yet another affirmation of this aspect of pilgrimage appears when the third Plenary Assembly of the FABC in the year 1982 writes: "Our Christian communities in Asia must listen to the Spirit at work in the many communities of believers who live and experience their own faith, who share and celebrate it in their own social, cultural and religious history, and that they (as communities of Gospel) must accompany these others "in a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal, in relentless search for the Absolute."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> FIRA V, 9, FAPA 4, 199. See also Mendoza (2008, 273): "It seems to me that Asian bishops would have no difficulty in affirming ... that the church fulfils and is fulfilled, enriches and is enriched, as the church listens to the Spirit in the different voices of the religious Other."

<sup>81</sup> FIRA V, 9, FAPA 4, 199.

<sup>82</sup> FEISA 7.2.1., FAPA 2, 60.

<sup>83</sup> FEISA 7.4.2., FAPA 2, 61.

<sup>84</sup> FABC 3, 8.2., FAPA 1, 57.

From the foregoing texts it can be argued that, based at least on certain documents of the FABC, the Asian bishops hold that the validity of the other religions does not cease even after the arrival of the Christian gospel. It even appears that the Asian bishops hold that their validity remains until the eschatological fulfilment. These religions do have their own part and role in bringing about this fulfilment. Dialogical mutuality remains until the very end. This approach certainly “resonates with the Asian psyche” and avoids extremes and exclusivism. Thus, also on this particular question it seems that “Asianness” constitutes a strong guiding principle for the FABC’s contextual theology. As well, the presence of the Word (or *Logos/Logos spermatikos*) and the Spirit in Asian contextual realities provides a significant common ground for the encounter between the Church and its message and Asia.

Thus, the understanding of the FABC about other religions presents a different interpretation of other religions than what the Vatican II documents discussed above appear to present. At least, the FABC’s position seems to be more open to a positive valuation of other religions as vehicles of salvation. But accepting other religions as willed by God does not yet give a decisive answer to the question of the relationship between the Christian faith and other religions. Is it perhaps necessary that there be a certain kind of fulfilment effected by the Gospel? To that question we turn now.

#### **4.2.2. Christianity and Other Religions: What Kind of Fulfilment, or Not at All?**

It appears that to a certain extent the FABC employs the traditional fulfilment terminology in their desire not to compromise the definitive character of Christianity, but at the same time there exists a strong thrust towards a contextual approach to Asian contexts, an impetus which makes the Asian bishops acknowledge a real, divine nature of other religions. This position is affirmed by their willingness to receive specific things from Asian religious traditions as was documented above.

However, in studying all the relevant texts regarding this question, one has to admit that the FABC is not fully consistent with its own position. In some places, more emphasis is placed on the fulfilment-model, whereas in other places the bishops’ thought ventures somewhat further in a direction in which religions need one another in their pilgrimage towards truth and the future realisation of the Kingdom of God. In this wavering between two different poles, one can detect a genuine effort to create a well-grounded Asian contextual Catholic theology. This has sometimes led the Asian Church into terrain earlier unexplored.

Passages of the following documents explicitly address the question of fulfilment. The 1974 first Plenary Assembly of the FABC states that through indigenization the life and cultures and all “human reality is assumed into the life of the Body of Christ, so that all of it may be purified and healed, perfected and fulfilled.”<sup>85</sup> In this, the Church brings about fulfilment. But this is not the whole picture: A 1978 Letter of Participants in the First Bishops’ Institute for Missionary Apostolate (BIMA) states that in God’s plan to bring all things to fulfilment in Christ as head, is still much to be discovered – the Church’s presentation of Christ does not fully correspond to God’s plan.<sup>86</sup> The Church cannot do it alone. Dialogue partners from other religions are needed for this.<sup>87</sup>

The 1979 FABC’s International Congress on Mission states explicitly that in the arena of incarnation/inculturation “The Spirit calls each people and each culture to its own creative response to the Gospel, to the fulfilment of its own vocation in the history of salvation.”<sup>88</sup> And yet more, the 1988 Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA) gathering further declares that “Through Christ and in Christ the Kingdom of God has come and is now progressing to its fulfilment.”<sup>89</sup> Here, fulfilment is not the “domain” of the Church, but it is in Christ that fulfilment takes place.

Hence, the Church has to be at the service of the fulfilment in Christ. “The Church ... is in a unique position to offer them [all human persons] the opportunity of sharing in this [paschal] mystery [of Jesus Christ] in a fully human way. She alone can convey them the explicit knowledge of Jesus Christ ... There [in Church’s proclamation] the seeds of the Word contained in the religious traditions of the world grow to maturity and come to fulfilment.”<sup>90</sup> However, this passage does not deny that the actual fulfilment takes place in Christ, to whom the Church testifies and which itself is a sign of him. In a similar manner, according to TAC in 1995, restoration of the original harmony takes place and is fulfilled in Christ.<sup>91</sup> The Office of Evangelisation of the FABC in 2002 affirms this: “We have to proclaim him as the Son of God, the unique Saviour of the world, the One who beyond human dreams fulfils the deepest yearnings of the Asian heart.”<sup>92</sup>

Different wordings regarding the question of fulfilment express the provisional nature of the FABC theology. As noted above, the bishops see their theological program as a reception and

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<sup>85</sup> FABC 1, 26, FAPA 1, 16.

<sup>86</sup> BIMA I, 12, FAPA 1, 94-95.

<sup>87</sup> BIMA I, 12, FAPA 1, 94-95. This same aspect appears in BIRA II, 11, (FAPA 1, 115), where the text reads that “The Christian finds himself continually evangelizing and being evangelized by his partners in dialogue.”

<sup>88</sup> International Congress on Mission 3.B, FAPA 1, 126.

<sup>89</sup> BIRA IV/10, 7, FAPA 1, 314.

<sup>90</sup> Conclusions of the Theological Consultations 49, FAPA 2, 204.

<sup>91</sup> TAC, Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 3.3.2, FAPA 2, 268.

<sup>92</sup> OE 4, FAPA 4, 250.



interpretation of the renewal inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council. In their effort to construct an Asian theology, the clarion call of the FABC rings out time and again: “If the Asian Churches do not discover their identity, they will have no future.”<sup>93</sup> In their search for their own identity, the bishops clearly intend to build on the renewal of Vatican II and keep faithful to Church’s authentic tradition. However, Asian contextual realities call for Asian-compatible responses. This imperative brings Asian, harmonious, complementary and dialogical character to the FABC’s theological process. This also fits in well with the pilgrim aspect of the theology of the FABC. It is provisional and a process. It is a pilgrimage.<sup>94</sup> A fuller understanding of truth is revealed only as the Church ventures further on, reflecting Asian contextual realities in light of the specifically Christian sources of Scripture and Tradition.

In a similar manner, in their search for harmony, the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) of the FABC acknowledges that Asian Christianity cannot attain the restoration of peace and harmony with God and other fellow human beings on their own. Mutual enrichment is called for: “The community of Christ’s disciples ... will never be able to do it alone. They are, with open mind and a humble heart, to recognize in all sisters and brothers, or whatever faith-conviction and culture, fellow wayfarers to God’s Reign. It is through a triple dialogue with cultures, with religions and with the poor (FABC I), through a mutually-enriching interchange in its various modes and at various levels ... that Asian Christianity is to strive for human and cosmic harmony in Jesus Christ.”<sup>95</sup> Therefore, dialogue is a method, means or approach resulting in the organic growth and development of the seeds of the Word into their full flower. What kind of growth and fulfilment takes place by the means of dialogue?

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<sup>93</sup> Asian Colloquium 14, FAPA 1, 70.

<sup>94</sup> Hwa Yung (1997, 97, 121) discusses contextualization and faithfulness to the Christian tradition. He argues that the indigenization principle “must be held in tension with the pilgrim principle, which reminds the Christian that the gospel cannot and must not be domesticated within any society and culture. ... That means the gospel must be incarnated into Asian soil without losing its distinctiveness.”

<sup>95</sup> TAC 4.11.6, FAPA 2, 285-286. Other FABC texts that employ the concept enrichment are: TAC 4.3., FAPA 2, 278 (Openness to the Spirit present in other religions enriches); TAC 5.1., FAPA 2, 286 (other faiths and cultures enrich the Church in its search of a new spirituality of lifestyle that witnesses to harmony); TAC 5.2.3., FAPA 2, 293 (enrichment by religio-cultural heritages of Asian peoples regarding ethical and moral values regarding truth, justice and freedom); FIRA II 3.7., FAPA 3, 129 (dialogue with followers of other religious paths is a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment); OTC Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 358 (faith of Christians has been deepened and enriched by inspiring texts of sacred scriptures of other faiths); OTC Methodology 4.1.3., FAPA 3, 367 (the new Asian biblical hermeneutics will become a resource for interfaith dialogue and bring about a mutual spiritual enrichment between Christians and their dialogue partners); Third Asia-Oceania Biblical Congress 12, FAPA 4, 269 (a dialogic interaction between the Word in Christian Scriptures and the voice of the Spirit in cultural and religious traditions enriches experience of the Word).

### 4.2.3. Dialogical Fulfilment

The expression “growing into full flower through dialogue” seems to signify that growing into perfection does not take place solely through the gospel, but in a dialogical process involving both Asian religions and Christian gospel. The expected end result is growth of the seeds of the Word. Through dialogue and interaction with the gospel, the already present seeds of the Word grow and yield good fruit within the life of Asian peoples. The perfection expected of the Asian religions will not mean their disappearance. Rather, the Asian religions provide a fertile soil which can produce a good fruit through dialogue with the gospel. This articulation of complementarity employing an image of organic growth and reciprocal interaction serves as yet another indicator of the FABC’s pursuit of an Asian contextual theology. The notions and language used here are well compatible with the FABC definition of Asianness as embracing complementary, harmonious and organic worldview.

The 1979 International Congress on Mission affirms the importance of dialogue with other religions as an indispensable method for discovering the seeds of the Word in other religions. This dialogue in turn, prepares the Church ready for a process of change which brings about a better contextualisation of the Church: “Then, the foreignness of the Church becomes less evident in the eyes of the persons of other faiths.”<sup>96</sup> The Church needs other religions, especially in the process of inculturation. The presence of other religions is primarily not a matter for theological speculation but rather a contextual reality that helps the Church to become more what it should be in Asia.

Further evidence of the FABC’s positive attitude towards other religions appears when in their first Plenary Assembly the bishops describe how seeds of the Word in the Asian religions will come to full flower and fruitfulness through dialogue with the Gospel: “... the Asian religions are brought into living dialogue with the Gospel, so that the seeds of the Word in them may come to full flower and fruitfulness within the life of our peoples.”<sup>97</sup> In this passage the importance of the Word of God in its seminal mode is again clearly visible. An idea of growing into perfection is expressed here, although such happens through dialogue. But again, the traffic is not one-way direction, from

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<sup>96</sup> “ Dialogue is a primary means and way for inculturation. We discover the seeds of the Word in other religions and we become open to and ready for a process of change. It makes us listen to others so that we can understand how they see us as Christians within the context of the Church’s message and her structures. Then, the foreignness of the Church becomes less evident in the eyes of the persons of other faiths.” International Congress on Mission II. 4.c., FAPA 1, 142.

<sup>97</sup> FABC 1, 27, FAPA 1, 16.

Gospel to Asian contexts, but rather through mutual dialogue. There is a reciprocal relationship between Christianity and other religions. Not only are the other religions complemented by and enriched by Christianity, but Christianity also is complemented and enriched by the other religions.<sup>98</sup> Here it should be remembered that the concepts of “complement “and “complementarity” were shown as expressing “Asianness” in the theology of the FABC.

Another term indicating the same purpose is “enriching”, or “enrichment”. The FABC employs the concept in many instances when discussing the relationship between the Christian faith and other religions. One key text reads:

To be able to move forward the contextual Church must be in direct contact with the peoples and religions of Asia. These religions enrich the Church as much as the Church enriches them. Together they are journeying on a pilgrimage where the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of justice, peace and love, is the end goal. Such a model is what FABC has often referred to as a Church engaged in the triple dialogue: dialogue with the poor, the religions and the cultures of Asia.<sup>99</sup>

This 2004 FIRA text characterises how the contextual Church in Asia should look. It should be in direct contact with the Asian peoples and their religions in order to enrich them and be enriched by them. This is a process of pilgrimage towards the Kingdom of God. This is a dialogical pilgrimage, which, in the FABC’s understanding is “faithful to the needs of the time and the context but also to the summons of the Second Vatican Council.”<sup>100</sup> This position also shows how the Federation understands the renewal inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council.<sup>101</sup> The contextual theology of the FABC is clearly intended as a reception of and interpretation of the Vatican II renewal in the midst Asian contextual realities. Asian contexts determine many of the theological and practical solutions to the question of how the Council’s teachings are to be applied in Asia. Asia requires responses which are harmonious and complementary with regard to Asian contexts. Asian contextual theology, therefore, is dialogical pilgrimage with Asian religions and cultures.

Yet another text, produced by FABC endorsed Asian Colloquium, explicates further this obviously important notion of Word of God:

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<sup>98</sup> “ They [Christ’s disciples] are, with an open mind and a humble heart, to recognize in all sisters and brothers, of whatever faith-conviction and culture, fellow wayfarers to God’s Reign. It is through a triple dialogue with cultures, with religions and with the poor (FABC I), through a mutually-enriching interchange in its various modes and at various levels, not the least in the dialogue of life with people of other faiths and religious traditions, that Asian Christianity is to strive for human and cosmic harmony in Jesus Christ.” TAC 4.11.6., FAPA 2, 285-286. In OTC Methodology 1.4. (FAPA 3, 336-337) complementarity among peoples, cultures, faiths, ideologies and world-visions is considered as characteristic of Asian traditions where various dimensions of reality are not contradictory but complementary (yin yang).

<sup>99</sup> FIRA V, 9, FAPA 4, 199.

<sup>100</sup> FIRA V, 9, FAPA 4, 199.

<sup>101</sup> FIRA V, 9, FAPA 4, 199.

We must now start collecting again the “seminal reasons” (*logoi spermatikoi*) in modern man’s old and new religions and integrate them into a new synthesis of the Gospel as it is experienced by today’s man. This will lead to a new era of theological reflection, liturgical creativity and new forms of religious life – a new era that will make the Catholic Church for the first time really “Catholic” by introducing into her the riches of all nations, as the riches of some have been introduced in the past. No doubt this will not take place without hesitation and danger, insecurity and uncertainty.<sup>102</sup>

This important passage from the early years of the FABC (1977) addresses the matters that the Church had to face in the future.<sup>103</sup> In this process, the desired end result would be a new era which eventually would make the Catholic Church truly Catholic. The leaven in this process is the “seminal reasons” in other religions brought into dialogue with the Gospel. The presence of the Word, or his seeds, is the common ground between the Gospel and other religions, on which a new era can be built. Here it should be remembered that “something new”, a “renewal”, has been a major reason for the existence of the FABC from its inception. Also the concepts of “integration” and “synthesis” are utilised here. “Integration” is an oft-appearing concept in the FABC documents, one which describes the theological thrust of the Asian bishops in creating an Asian compatible contextual theology. In addition, a new term of synthesis comes to the fore here: “a new synthesis of the Gospel”. These two concepts certainly are significant expressions of the FABC’s contextual theology. What do they mean or entail?

This synthesis involves more than transplanting or translating the Gospel in a new context. The notion implies a mutual interaction between the Gospel and cultures, i.e., contextual realities.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Asian Colloquium 19, FAPA 1, 71.

<sup>103</sup> Asian Colloquium 19, FAPA 1, 71: “The Asian Churches will find themselves in a strange position in the years to come. They will have to wage a two-front war and will other religions both as allies and as opponents: as allies in their fight against atheistic and antitheistic humanism; as opponents to Christianity’s claim for the uniqueness of Christ and His Church’s mission.”

<sup>104</sup> Stephen Bevans introduces different models on contextual theologies of which “synthetic model” is one. He characterises the model as following: it tries to keep the integrity of the traditional Christian message while acknowledging the importance of taking context seriously. Further, this model sees the importance of reflective and intelligent action for the development of a theology that does not ignore the complexities of social and cultural change. Further, according to Bevans’s definition, the model is synthetic in the Hegelian sense of developing in a creative dialectic something that is acceptable to all standpoints. The model can also be called “dialogical model”. In terms of theology, this means that one can hear God speaking both in the contexts in which the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures were written and also in one’s own experience. God’s revelation is therefore historically circumscribed within the particular contexts in which the scriptures were written (contextually conditioned message), but God’s revelation is at the same time operative in one’s own context and calls for perfection of that context through cultural transformation and social change. In the synthetic model experiences of the present (context) are brought into dialogue with the basic themes of gospel and tradition. The dialogue between culture and tradition thus becomes the heart of this process, and it has a mutually transforming effect on both dialogue partners. Bevans 2002, 88-93. The FABC’s contextual, dialogical theological approach seems on many points to fall within the synthetic, dialogical model as described by Bevans.

Peter N.V. Hai analyses FABC’s contextual theology, utilising Bevans’s models. Hai contends that the FABC’s theology “is best understood in terms of the synthetic model, which incorporates the salient features of all three models of anthropological, praxis, and translation, and hence keeps in balance four key elements of contextual theology, viz. Gospel, tradition, culture and social change. Underlying the FABC’s theological methodologies is a pastoral and

Apparently the FABC's theology is an Asian, contextual theology in the making, in process and in continuous development. Time and again a reader of the FABC documents will encounter an Asian pilgrim Church searching for truth and for viable ways of expressing the Gospel message in the midst of Asian contexts.

An important constitutive factor of integration and synthesis is the Word of God, which, based on his pre-existence before the creation of the world and in also in creation, is permanently present in all creation, including in other cultures and religions. Based on the Johannine writings in the Christian canon and Logos theology of some early Church fathers, the FABC accepts the presence of the Word or his seeds in all creation, based on the primordial goodness of God's creation through his Word, the Logos. The FABC then intends to bring this presence of the Word into dialogue with Asian contextual realities. The dialogue will then lead to the discovery of "good" and "truth" in other cultures and religions.<sup>105</sup>

Moreover, further evidence of the presence of "truth" in Asian religions is found in this OTC's Methodology (2000) passage:

Asian people believe that the Transcendent is present and active in all religious traditions. In discerning and interpreting the word of God present in them, we take seriously the doctrine of the "Word of God coming to enlighten every man"(John 1:9). We read in Acts (14:17) that God never leaves himself without witness. The scriptures of other religions can be said to be witnesses of God, a providential means of God's communication.<sup>106</sup>

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contextual process, which consists in an exposure to and an analysis of contextual realities (See), a reflection and discernment in light of the Gospel and tradition (Judge), and a planning of responses and concrete actions (Act). This contextual methodology translates into the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach, or "communion process," to address the needs and aspirations of basic ecclesial communities and lay people in the Church." Hai 2006, 25.

In my view Hai's treatise is well founded and accurate. However, the FABC does not place itself into this kind of frame, or model. Characterising FABC's theology as a model does not necessarily reveal much of the theological content of the FABC's thought. It will therefore be inadequate to analyse FABC's contextual theology merely in terms of a model. A closer and more thorough analysis of specific theological and dogmatic concepts is imperative.

Bevans is well aware of the restrictions of the notion of models and their use. He writes that it is important to understand that models are constructions, not mirrors of a reality "out there". Nevertheless, models are not just "useful fictions"; they are disclosive of reality. Understanding models this way requires that one subscribes to a philosophy of critical realism. This means that while recognising that we can never fully know a reality as it is in itself, at the same time, however, we realise that what is known is truly known. In this way of thinking, the knowledge we obtain is partial and inadequate but never false or merely subjective. In theology, a model is a "case" that is useful in simplifying a complex reality. While it does not fully capture the reality, it however yields true knowledge of it. Bevans 2002, 28-31.

<sup>105</sup> In the FABC texts, there are numerous instances where the clearly positive status of Asian religions is explicitly affirmed. "The great religions of Asia with their respective creeds, cults and codes reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures." BIRA IV/7, 12, FAPA 1, 310. Here also the role of the Holy Spirit is mentioned. The FABC clearly accepts the work of the Holy Spirit outside of the Christian dispensation. The FABC also speaks about Asian characteristics and values that are integral to the proclamation of the Gospel in Asia. See OCL, FAPA 4, 294.

<sup>106</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 357.

Here the OTC argues that the Transcendent is present in all religious traditions. This presence gives them a positive significance. Moreover, through discernment the Word of God can also be found in them. Christian theology recognises in this present Transcendent, the Divine, Triune God: “A Christian will also be deeply concerned with the Divine, the presence of the Word, and the action of the Spirit renewing and transforming people, their life and behaviour, and leading them to salvation.”<sup>107</sup> The salvific presence of the Divine, the Word and the Spirit is clearly affirmed. Followers of other faiths can attain salvation through their own religious adherence. However, this happens not outside of the Word of God (Christ) and the Holy Spirit but in connection to them, through the faith convictions of followers of other faiths: “But, as there is no salvation except by the saving grace of God, all salvation attained by men is the fruit of the gift of Christ. This we believe to be particularly true of the Great Religions of Asia that led countless people to God throughout the ages.”<sup>108</sup>

Thus, the Asian Catholic bishops argue that salvation attained through other religions has always come through Christ.<sup>109</sup> This clearly shows an inclusivist understanding of the theology of religions.

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<sup>107</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 357. See also International Congress on Mission 12, FAPA 1, 137: “Of particular relevance to the Church in Asia is a new theological understanding of the role that “the living faiths of mankind” today play in the work of salvation. They and we must understand the saving activity of God in them. “ When discussing religions, one cannot avoid the question about the presence of truth found in religions. Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs (FIRA) of the FABC comments on this question: “We also explored theological issues which remain ambiguous, not the least being the Church’s doctrine of salvation, and teachings on mission, conversion and evangelism. In particular, we asked questions about the Church’s teachings on the “truth” found in other religions. We are inclined to place less emphasis on doctrines and theologies and more emphasis on emulating Jesus as our model of dialogue, compassion and understanding.” FIRA III, 4.4., FAPA 3, 137. This document was produced with the reception of Vatican’s *Dominus Iesus* in Asia. The FIRA finds some of its expressions ambivalent with regard to interreligious dialogue. It is perhaps also important to point out that this particular document is a product of a youth leadership training session and represents the voice of the Asian Catholic youth.

<sup>108</sup> BIRA I, II.7, FAPA 1, 110. The FABC is also clear in its contention that for one to attain salvation it is not required to become a member of the Church. Here also the concept “Reign of God” is important. The FABC acknowledges that the Reign of God extends far beyond the boundaries of the Church. However, in the FABC’s view the Reign of God is always related to Christ. Thus a “regnocentric” approach to theology and salvation does not threaten the Christocentric perspective of the faith. Rather, they both call for one another. “This goes to show that the Reign of God is a universal reality, extending far beyond the boundaries of the Church. It is the reality of salvation in Jesus Christ, in which Christians and others share together.” OE Theological Consultation 30, FAPA 2, 200. See also note x below how D’Costa emphasises the necessity of keeping the Reign of God and Jesus Christ in relation to each another.

<sup>109</sup> This is noted also by Mendoza : “Sebastian Painadath claims, ‘The Asian bishops acknowledge the revelatory and salvific character of Asian religions. In this they pick up the vision of Vatican II and go beyond the theological framework of traditional western theology which shies away from accepting believers of other religions as ‘equal partners.’ (Painadath, “Theological Perspectives,” Jeevadhara, 274). In my opinion, the FABC’s position on the salvific character of other religions is not as simple as Painadath appears to make it. The FABC does not explicitly say that other religions *per se* are salvific. Their being salvific, it is apparent, is always related to Jesus, the Spirit and the Church.” Mendoza 2008, 206 n.65. – In my opinion, the FABC’s position is that salvation is always related to Christ and the Spirit, but the Church’s role in the economy of salvation with respect to other religions is not absolute; Christ

The presence of Christ and the Spirit is acknowledged also in non-Christian tradition, history, culture and religions.<sup>110</sup> This view is affirmed by reference to John 1:9, which speaks of the Word of God who comes to enlighten every man.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, the scriptures of other religions also can be witnesses of God, and as spiritual nourishment to the adherents of these religions, they can also be called “word of God in words of men”.<sup>112</sup> This latter point discusses the notion of the Word of God as related to sacred scriptures of other religions. How, then, does the Federation manage to negotiate the delicate and sensitive question about the relationship between the Scripture of the Church and the sacred scriptures of other religions?

#### **4.2.4. The Bible and the Sacred Scriptures of Other Religions**

The Office of Theological Concerns distinguishes between the Bible and the sacred scriptures of other faiths through use of the term “inspiration”. While the FABC acknowledges that scriptures of other faiths are “willed by God in his Providence”<sup>113</sup>, they also note that they are not inspired in the sense in which the Bible is inspired.<sup>114</sup> Nonetheless, the Church recognises God’s presence in

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and his Spirit can be encountered outside the bounds of the Church.

<sup>110</sup> It is noteworthy that FABC does not call adherents of other religions non-Christians but people of other faiths. The purpose of speaking this way is certainly not to use Christianity as the standard against which other religions are defined.

<sup>111</sup> “In discerning and interpreting the word of God present in them, we take seriously the doctrine of the “Word of God coming to enlighten every man”(John 1:9). We read in Acts (14:17) that God never leaves himself without witness.” OTC Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 357.

<sup>112</sup> “The scriptures of other religions can be said to be witnesses of God, a providential means of God’s communication. We know in fact how much our brothers and sisters of other faiths are spiritually nourished by their scriptures. We need to recognize that in God’s providence, the scriptures have helped the followers of other religions to mediate to them a God-encounter. In turn, our own faith has been clarified, deepened and enriched by their inspiring texts, embodying spiritual ideals. If these texts are willed by God in his providence for them, one can call them in some sense the word of God in the words of men.” OTC Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 357-358.

<sup>113</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 358.

<sup>114</sup> “People of other faiths consider their scriptures normative for them, providing guidelines for their faith experience, but we do not consider them “inspired” in the sense the Bible is considered inspired. We hold that these scriptures are also willed by God in his Providence. When we use the scriptures of other believers in our theology, we read them in the light of their faith and their discernment. However, our reading of these scriptures reflects a Christian perspective. But, insofar as we are heirs to this heritage, we recognize God’s presence in them, and guidance coming from them, and submit ourselves to him who guides all to salvation. Hence, for us the foundational writings of the Asian Experience of the Transcendent God are an important resource for theology.” OTC Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 358.

other sacred scriptures and accepts the guidance of God which comes from them.<sup>115</sup> They reflect Asian, (i.e., contextual), experience of the Transcendent God, and as such are an important resource for doing theology in Asia. The sacred scriptures of other faiths belong to the same category as contextual realities. They are willed by God; they contain and mediate God's salvific will to their adherents.

The FABC document adds that, for Christian theology; the Bible remains the primary source. Only it "mediates the revelation of the mystery of God manifested in Christ, God's eschatological saving presence among us, testified to for us by the apostolic preaching ("faith of the apostles")."<sup>116</sup>

The Bible is the primary source also because it is "the authenticated expression of God's eschatological revelation which gives the final meaning to all history."<sup>117</sup> It is important to note the emphasis here: the FABC does not claim that the Bible be exclusive revelation to all; it is the primary source for the Church and Christian theology. Other sacred scriptures are welcomed and received as supplementary witnesses of God, and these witnesses can apparently broaden the understanding of the Church of God's presence and revelation in Asia. The FABC appears to admit that other religions and their sacred scriptures can also help the Church to better understand God's revelation. These scriptures are the word of God in a relative sense, but the FABC appears to think that they contain God's revelation in a partial manner. The FABC, however, obviously does not want to use the categories of "perfection" or "fulfilment" here. The sacred scriptures of other faiths are not "stepping stones", waiting to be perfected by the Christian revelation. They have their own independent value *per se*, not in relation to the Christian Scriptures. But in the Christian framework and for Christians, they serve as supplementary material which helps Christians to understand God better and more fully. Consequently, the Bible can in turn serve as supplementary material for other religions.<sup>118</sup> In this understanding, the FABC accepts the approach typical to comparative theology. Religions can enrich each other and help each other in growing in their own understanding of faith. Here a dialogical approach comes to the fore. Moreover, in the FABC's thought we can see the

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<sup>115</sup> "In Asia, the sacred writings and books of various religions are never treated merely as reading materials. They are meant to draw from one's heart a response of adherence at the very last. The reverence with which sacred books are approached and listened to reveal a belief that more than human words are involved." *Living Eucharist in Asia*, FAPA 5, 17.

<sup>116</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 358.

<sup>117</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 358.

<sup>118</sup> Many Asian religions do not hold the strict view of a closed canon of a particular sacred scripture. For them, embracing other documents as important, even sacred, is thus not a disputable issue. This is commented by Lee (2008, 182): "Within the Asian pluralistic religious world, Asians have been used to having pluralistic scriptural traditions. The Indians and the Chinese in particular are in possession of numerous scriptural texts and have never established a doctrine of scripture that excludes others as pagan and uncivilized. Conversion to Christianity would not, therefore, present any serious conflict and dilemma to the local Christian converts."



operative significance of the presence of the Spirit and the Word of God and its seeds in other religions as a motivation for an amicable reception of other religions. This presence exhorts the Church to enter into dialogue with the religions.

The Federation's positive approach to other religions is not primarily the politeness of a small Christian church amongst vast masses of adherents of other faiths. Rather it represents a genuine "Asian" approach to the question, in which complementariness is preferred to exclusiveness. Avoidance of extremes and a harmonious approach are recurrent themes as the FABC attempts to produce an Asian contextual theology.

Thus, when examining whether the Asian bishops subscribe to the fulfilment paradigm, it seems that ultimately, when the FABC employs the concept of fulfilment, it is always understood in a dialogical manner. Although standard concepts of the fulfilment-theory (such as purification and healing), are at certain points utilised, what is new is the willingness to receive something substantial from other religions. They certainly are in need of fulfilment, but in a dialogical process they can also help the Church become more fully what it should be. Thus, the FABC's model can also be termed as "mutual, complementary and dialogical fulfilment", which is compatible with "Asianness" as characterised by the FABC. The Asian Catholic Church is in service of and testifies to this fulfilment ultimately realised in God's universal, salvific will in Christ. Thus, there is a clear inclusivist tone in the Federation's theology, although this inclusivism is not restricted to the Church; it is much broader, and the Church's task and mission is to witness to fulfilment and salvation in Christ .

As was argued above, the FABC accepts other religions as capable of contributing to a better understanding of truth for the Church as well. The FABC apparently accepts other religions in this way through its attempt to learn more from them other faiths and their impetus to become a more Asian church. One indicator of this approach is the FABC's assessment of other faiths from a comparative perspective. The next section will address this topic.

#### 4.2.5. Comparative Theology in the FABC Documents

It appears that in its theology the FABC takes steps towards an approach which is that of comparative theology.<sup>119</sup> Many examples of this are found for example in various texts of the Formation Institute for Religious Affairs (FIRA) of the FABC.<sup>120</sup> The FIRA calls for an authentic religious dialogue which re-images the Christian faith in the light of Asian realities. New symbols, rituals, language and expressions of ‘truly Asian in flavour and character’ will be born out of this engagement. The Church has to delve into Asian resources and “sit at the feet of our Asian spiritual

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<sup>119</sup> Comparative theology is normally understood as the study of one or more religious traditions other than one’s own. It differs from the general study of religions or theology of religions in that in comparative theology one reflects critically on one’s own tradition in light of the other tradition or other traditions. The practitioner is rooted in one’s own religion and even be an active practitioner of it. S/he pays systematic and consistent attention to the details of the other theological and religious traditions. One may analyse the concept of salvation in one’s own religion and compare it with another religious tradition. Active involvement may deepen one’s understanding of both the other tradition and of one’s own. As described in the FIRA’s text cited above (FIRA I, 2.7., FAPA 3, 121), this journey of comparative theology involves change. This is a risk which the practitioner of interreligious dialogue in general and comparative theology in particular accepts.

The pioneers of comparative theology include Francis X. Clooney and James Fredericks. Clooney’s most important books in this field are *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (1993) in which the author compares a Hindu Advaita Vedanta theology and certain central elements of Christian theology, (e.g. the notion of salvation) in Hindu tradition and in the theology of St. Thomas of Aquinas.), Clooney’s ambitious and programmatic goal is expressed in the area of comparative theology as he writes in the foreword of one of his books: “My goal has been to show how even the more difficult and stubborn points of religious and theological difference remain places where the mind can willingly visit, think, speak and thus infuse new vitality and insight into believing lives.” (Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (2001). Other significant publications by Clooney are *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (2008), *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and Virgin Mary* (2004), *The Truth, The Way, The Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaishnava Hindus* (2008), *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (2010) and *His Hiding Place is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (2014). As is clear from the titles of his works, Clooney’s main interest and area of speciality is comparison Christian theology with Hindu theology. Another prolific author and scholar in the field of comparative theology is James Fredericks. His area of special expertise and interest is Buddhist-Christian comparative theology. His major publications are *Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (1999) and *Buddhists and Christians: through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (2004). Both Clooney and Fredericks are Roman-Catholics.

The Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong is another comparative theologian. In his *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue* (2012), Yong searches for a possible convergence between Christian and Theravada Buddhist soteriology. The Christian material he uses is Eastern Orthodox spirituality as represented in the desert tradition. Here the key concept is becoming divine, deification (*theosis*). Yong analyses the psycho-dynamics of liberation in *Philokalia* through the concept of the “way of the desert” and the “mortification of the flesh”, “spiritual warfare” and the “illumination of the mind” and “deification and the “hesychast”. Possible equivalent Buddhist terms of perfection and liberation are *sila* (“morality” in the Pali language) and the purification of virtue, *samadhi* (“concentration”) and the “purification of consciousness” and *panna* (“wisdom”, “insight” or “understanding”) and the “perfection of the arahant” (the arahant is like a Buddha, one who has perfected wisdom and compassion and is no longer subject to rebirth). Having laid out the desert father and Theravadin arahant traditions Yong proposes a comparative analysis along phenomenological and practical, psychological and epistemological lines and then finally theological and pneumatological lines. Yong 2012, 107-177. Basic information and ongoing discussion on comparative theology can also be found at [www.comparativetheology.org](http://www.comparativetheology.org) The website also publishes *online Journal of Comparative Theology*.

<sup>120</sup> Functions of the FIRA see page 53.

masters and sages and allow ourselves to be nourished by their wisdom, their sacred texts.”<sup>121</sup> It is clear that the FIRA’s primary motivation for utilising comparative theology is dialogue, which in turn is motivated by God’s own ongoing dialogue with humanity at all times and in all places.<sup>122</sup> But dialogue presupposes engagement and encounter. It is not exercised primarily in the study but in real engagement with real people who are adherents of and representatives of other religions. Dialogue with other religions takes place at many levels.<sup>123</sup> Typical for the approach of comparative theology, the FIRA encourages the Asian Church to engage in encounter, while being consciously rooted in the Christian faith and tradition. The motivation and source for this encounter is deepened personal experience with God and with all creation.<sup>124</sup> However, the FABC seems to be firmly rooted in the Christian faith: “As Christians we have access to this divine presence in history through the person and event of Jesus Christ.”<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, the FIRA IV document continues: “In Christ we recognise the incarnational, decisive and definitive entry of the Divine into the world.”<sup>126</sup> The church engages in dialogue with the others from this perspective, firmly rooted in Christ as the “decisive and definitive” presence of the Divine in the world. But this standpoint should not produce a judgmental attitude towards others. The text cautions its readers not to use exclusive language and normative claims.<sup>127</sup>

Many places in the FABC documents clearly explicate the rationale and argumentation for comparison, or comparative theology with Asian religions. The Bishops’ Institute for Religious Affairs (BIRA) and the documents of Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) provide most material concerning this rationale. One unquestionable impetus for seeking common ground between religions is of course the incarnation. The Word must become flesh in each and every context. Another argument is the FABC’s understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit as taking place also

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<sup>121</sup>FIRA I, 2.11, FAPA 3, 121. Cf. Pieris 1988, 47: “The mission crisis is solved only when the church is baptized in the twofold liberative tradition of monks and peasants of Asia. Like its own Master, let it sit at the feet of Asian gurus not as an *ecclesia docens* (a teaching church) but as an *ecclesia discens* (a learning church), lost among the “religious poor” of Asia, among the *anawim* who go to their gurus in search of the kingdom of holiness, justice, and peace.”

<sup>122</sup> FIRA IV 15, FAPA 3, 143.

<sup>123</sup> The Federation speaks about four different kinds of dialogue between religions: (1) dialogue of life which is the actual everyday life with neighbours and colleagues, (2) dialogue of action, which is taking action for the common good with people of other religions, (3) dialogue of shared religious experiences, and (4) interreligious dialogue. FIRA II, 4.2.-4.3., FAPA 3, 130-131. See also BIRA V/5, 10, FAPA 2, 169: “This form of dialogue [dialogue of religious experience] can be called the most difficult, since it presupposes a high degree of trust. The sharing of religious experience challenges and transforms those who engage in it.” Comparative theology as constructive theology is situated primarily in the third and fourth areas.

<sup>124</sup> FIRA IV, 12, FAPA 3, 142.

<sup>125</sup> FIRA IV, 16, FAPA 3, 143.

<sup>126</sup> FIRA IV; 16, FAPA 3, 146.

<sup>127</sup> FIRA IV, 16, FAPA 3, 146.

beyond the boundaries of the church.<sup>128</sup> BIRA IV/3 affirms that the presence of the Holy Spirit in and outside of the Church in Asia guides one to accept “receptive pluralism”; the Holy Spirit can be encountered within different contexts. Different cultures, religions and worldviews are different responses to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.<sup>129</sup> This accepted theological assertion serves as an impetus for Christians to begin engaging with other religions, an activity which should take place not just because of curiosity or sharing information, but for the sake of mutual learning and enrichment from each other’s religious tradition. Moreover, the FABC’s fifth plenary assembly in 1990 calls for dialogue between religious traditions in the hope of a more holistic spirituality. There, the bishops characterise Catholic spirituality as a spirituality based on incarnation and sacramentality. The core of this sacramentality “is about finding the mystery of the Divine in everyday reality.”<sup>130</sup> This desire for sacramentality and the contemplative can converge with the contemplative traditions of other religions.<sup>131</sup> This convergence is possible because of the presence of the seeds of the Word in cultures and religious traditions and because of the work of the Spirit, who leads all to unity and fulfilment.<sup>132</sup> Here, again, fulfilment is not only effected by the explicit proclamation of the Church. It is work of the Spirit, who also works beyond the boundaries of the Church.

As the FABC develops themes particular to the approach of comparative theology, it provides more arguments for its position. The bishops identify the quest for integral liberation and salvation as the common ground of Asian religions. Also, they perceive life as “the spiritual pilgrimage in pursuit of Truth, Harmony, the Divine” which gives ultimate meaning to life in Asia.<sup>133</sup> The concept of “pilgrimage” is common among religions, and it is understood by world religious traditions as a spiritual process. However, it is described differently in various religious traditions: Hinduism articulates it “as the process of transition from non-being to Being, from darkness to Light, from death to Immortality. The Buddhist seekers experience life as a relentless journey to taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.”<sup>134</sup> “Islam understands human life as a following of the Straight Path of God’s will, leading from the prescriptions of Islam, through *iman* (faith) to the

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<sup>128</sup> “This calls for a contextual reading of the Christian scriptures done with sensitivity to the Spirit who whispers in mysterious and unbounded ways, through the rich cultural and religious resources of Asia.” Third Asia-Oceania Biblical Congress 12, FAPA 4, 269. A specific chapter of the present study will be devoted to theology of the Holy Spirit, but because the motivations and themes are often overlapping, it is impossible to avoid discussing the central importance of the Holy Spirit in the context of comparative theology as well.

<sup>129</sup> BIRA IV/3, 16, FAPA 1, 261.

<sup>130</sup> FABC 5, 2.3.4., FAPA 1, 278.

<sup>131</sup> FABC 5, 2.3.4., FAPA 1, 278

<sup>132</sup> FABC 5, 3.1.1., FAPA 1, 279-280

<sup>133</sup> FEISA 7.1.1., FAPA 2, 59.

<sup>134</sup> FEISA 7.1.2., FAPA 2, 59.

fullness of *ihsan* (goodness) and *islah* (righteousness).”<sup>135</sup> After these descriptions, the document describes the Christian life as following Jesus in whom the Christians experience the Way, the Truth and the Life. In this process, the Church is invited to join the spiritual pilgrimage with the adherents of other religions. Thus, in the FABC’s theology, despite the differences among religions in theological and spiritual languages, it is precisely the common pilgrimage that unites. This common understanding represents not simply terminological agreement but also agreement on the purpose of pilgrimage as a spiritual process. This agreement on the common pilgrimage constitutes a common ground upon which pilgrims of different religions can meet and discover a way to a fuller understanding of truth. In this pursuit, in dialogue with followers of other religions, a contemplative experience of the Divine who is “the Ever-Beyond” evolves.

Here a question about salvation cannot be avoided, since all religions understand themselves to be ways of salvation and to salvation. Certainly, one can discern specific phenomenological and psychological similarities in the salvific systems of all religions. Ontologically, however, and epistemologically as well, religions do not seem to speak about the same ‘thing’. In the Christian faith, salvation has to do with personal relationship to the triune God, the resurrection of the body and ascension to heaven. In Buddhism and Hinduism, for example, salvation is essentially liberation from suffering and the cycle of rebirths. Further, the concept *nirvana* as liberation from the cycle of rebirths does not represent the same ontological understanding as the ‘Christian heaven’. Moreover, pluralist view of religions as different paths to a common destiny (sometimes described as the ‘peak of a mountain’) does not respect the ontological differences between religions. Thus, the way in which religions describe the ontological content of their salvific systems cannot be harmonised by force. The FABC’s Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) is well aware of these challenges when it writes: “God is not an object among other objects but the absolute subject. God as the infinite transcends all that we can say about God’s being. God remains always a mystery. How then can we speak about the transcendence and immanence of God in itself? How can one adequately express one’s experience of God in a way that can be communicated to others?”<sup>136</sup>

The final words of this passage pose a challenge both to the Christian mission and to religious dialogue. The OTC proposes several possible solutions: they first observe that “language is not as objective or literal as many have thought.”<sup>137</sup> Language is contextually and historically contingent. Therefore, finding a universal language which speaks the truth about God will be difficult. The

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<sup>135</sup> FEISA 7.1.3., FAPA 2, 60.

<sup>136</sup> OTC, Methodology 5.1.1., FAPA 3, 406.

<sup>137</sup> OTC, Methodology 5.1.1., FAPA 3, 406.

OTC then proceeds to describe theological language as a personal language, an analogical language. Slipping into extreme apophatic language is not a solution for the OTC; such usage of apophatic language would be irrelevant and impossible to communicate.<sup>138</sup> Thus, the OTC's proposes accepting followers of other religions as co-pilgrims, all of whom search for truth. On this common way the truth reveals more of itself to those who seek it. This common way is not merely theological discourse but also a process which makes participants "increasingly sensitive to human suffering and [causes them to] collaborate in promoting justice, peace, and ecological wholeness."<sup>139</sup>

All this is seen as a journey of a fruitful process, during which the shared experiences with one's co-pilgrims enrich all participants.<sup>140</sup> This last observation is crucial to comparative theological approach: those who are engaged in it maintain their respective faith convictions but search for a fuller and richer understanding of their own religion via the religious convictions and expressions of other religions. This pursuit does not entail compromising and harmonising the existing epistemological and ontological differences between religions. An enthusiastic comparative theologian might wish to ignore and harmonise the sometimes profound differences between religions. The OTC acknowledges this: "This kind of openness [here: the fusion between the Confucian and the Christian horizons] is not without its weaknesses and limitations. It readily lends itself to fanciful and forced interpretations."<sup>141</sup> From this it is apparent that the FABC's theologians do not support these "forced interpretations."

The salience of the concept of harmony as an indispensable framework for the FABC's contextual theology was discussed quite extensively earlier in the present study; the same notion occurs in the context of comparative theology as well. What then is the role of harmony in comparative theology?

As already noted above, comparative theology in the FABC's text corpus primarily appears in the documents of the BIRA<sup>142</sup> and the OTC. BIRA V/2, which discusses the concept of harmony in the Christian and Buddhist understanding, describes harmony as "a characteristic of Reality that all of us [Asia's cultural and religious traditions] are called to experience and realize."<sup>143</sup> It explains obstacles towards harmony in terms of "ignorance, egoism, craving and sinfulness", which are "a

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<sup>138</sup> OTC Methodology 5.1.3, FAPA 3, 407.

<sup>139</sup> BIRA V/3, 6, FAPA 2, 158.

<sup>140</sup> "In this twofold dynamics of our journeying with sisters and brothers of other religions we find ourselves in a process of sharing our experience with the co-pilgrims, and being enriched by them in return." FEISA 7.3.2., FAPA 2, 60-61.

<sup>141</sup> OTC, Methodology 4.5.6., FAPA 3, 399.

<sup>142</sup> First BIRA (Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs) assembly was held in 1979.

<sup>143</sup> BIRA V/2, 3.1., FAPA 2, 150-151.

cause of division and conflict...”.<sup>144</sup> However “harmony as liberation and fullness, joy and peace, realization and nirvana, remains a desired goal.”<sup>145</sup> Here the text clearly indicates that religions can agree that harmony adequately describes a salient and perennial common ground of all religions. Here the BIRA document mentions “harmony in oneself”, “harmony with the Cosmos”, “harmony with others” and finally “harmony with God or the Absolute or whatever we perceive as the ultimate goal of life.”<sup>146</sup> This last sentence is an important indicator that at least at this stage (1994) the FABC had not been able to find a common understanding of the concept of harmony among all religions. In FABC’s theology harmony seems to constitute a rather wide ‘blanket term’ which is argued to be a perennial common goal of Asian religions, and actually the core of being Asian as a whole. After that, the document ventures on to explore what Buddhists and Christians agree on harmony. Certain convergence can be found when both participants in dialogue agree that disharmony is caused by ignorance, egoism and attachment, which are shown in sinful behaviour, and when they agreed that the remedy is in promotion of personal conversion and awareness.<sup>147</sup> Precisely what ontologically constitutes harmony cannot be identified here, but the participants do agree that a dialogue of spiritual experience helps participants to understand each other better. One useful way to do spiritual dialogue is to practise one’s own spirituality employing the other’s spiritual practices.<sup>148</sup> This is a learning process which is typical of comparative theology, for which it is considered imperative to attempt to acquire in-depth understanding the religion of other’s religion.

#### 4.2.6. Comparative Theology as Practiced by the FABC

In 1995, BIRA V/3 conducted a dialogue with Hinduism. After first explaining the Hindu and Christian perception of harmony, the dialogue document attempts to bring these perceptions of harmony two to interaction with the intention of establishing common principles. It appears that that the FABC embraces a pluralistic expression of harmony: “*Samanvaya* is the spiritual pursuit of the totality of reality in its infinite diversity and radical unity.”<sup>149</sup> Hence, the ultimate reality as

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<sup>144</sup> BIRA V/2, 3.1., FAPA 2, 151.

<sup>145</sup> BIRA V/2, 3.1., FAPA 2, 151.

<sup>146</sup> BIRA V/2, 3.2., FAPA 2, 151.

<sup>147</sup> BIRA V/2, 6, FAPA 2, 152.

<sup>148</sup> BIRA V/2, 7., FAPA 2, 152.

<sup>149</sup> BIRA V/3, 6., FAPA 2, 157.

understood here is unity-in-plurality. Divergent forms of reality are united in the “convergent rhythm that harmonises them.”<sup>150</sup> This understanding interprets pluralism as resonating with the plurality of discernible reality. Consequently, religions are not seen as competitive interpreters or holders of the ultimate truth, but rather they are “complementary perceptions of the ineffable divine mystery, the God-beyond-God.”<sup>151</sup> Based on this BIRA’s view, can it be argued that Bishops’ Institute for Religious Affairs completely accepts pluralism as understood in Hinduism? Where is the importance of a personal God as the ultimate reality?

In the BIRA dialogue with Hindus, the BIRA first explicitly affirm that pluralism resonates with the plurality of reality.<sup>152</sup> In this view, no religion can claim authority over the others, and followers of different religions are said to be “co-pilgrims, who share intimate spiritual experiences and reflections with one another with concern and compassion, with genuine openness to truth and the freedom of spiritual seekers (*sadhakas*).”<sup>153</sup> In this same context, the BIRA explicitly rejects both exclusivism and inclusivism as theological positions: “Inclusivism does not respect the identity of each religion, and exclusivism does not recognize the relationality of religions.”<sup>154</sup> However, the BIRA does not subscribe to pluralism in the sense the term is normally used. Rather, they argue that: “To say that all religions are the same is simplistic and does not promote honest dialogue, but to argue that religions do not meet at all would block any creative interaction.”<sup>155</sup> Thus, plurality of religions calls for taking religions on their own terms, and, at the same time, this plurality is also an imperative fact to bear in mind in the dialogue among religions.

Moreover, the Second Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs (FIRA) of the FABC (1999) identifies the Asian psyche as an important element in the search for common ground with adherents of other religions. Here, again, a salient undergirding principle is harmony:

The Asian psyche tends towards a transpersonal rather than an interpersonal spirituality – that is, towards the notion of the Divine beyond personality, rather than the Divine as Thou, toward a spirituality that is more mystical than prophetic, more feminine than masculine. It resonates with the vision of harmony. As Asian Christians, we seek to live with a natural perception of harmony with the

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<sup>150</sup> BIRA V/3, 6., FAPA 2, 157.

<sup>151</sup> BIRA V/3, 6, FAPA 2, 157.

<sup>152</sup> BIRA V/3, 6, FAPA 2, 157.

<sup>153</sup> BIRA V/3, 6, FAPA 2, 158.

<sup>154</sup> BIRA V/3, 7, FAPA 2, 158.

<sup>155</sup> BIRA V/3, 7, FAPA 2, 158.



cosmos, with others and with the Divine. Our sense of harmony does not mean suppressing [sic!] differences but building upon the unity that underlies all differences.<sup>156</sup>

Thus, this document argues that a certain “Asian” character, the Asian psyche, a sense of harmony, is a common ground among all faiths in Asia. At least to a certain extent this “Asian character” seems to override otherwise acknowledged differences in religions.

However, it is important to note that the FABC does not state that their vision of Christian faith is fully compatible with this transpersonal understanding; Christian faith maintains its belief in an interpersonal relationship between God and human beings. However, underscoring the notion of a harmony which underlies all differences seems to imply that the FABC wants to be able to identify a common denominator for all Asian faiths. In a harmonious vision, all differences and divisions will be ‘harmonised’. If this happens, one can certainly ask whether this also means that the truth will accordingly be compromised. The latter, of course, cannot be the result one is hoping for as one sets out on the comparative theological enterprise. The main purpose exercising comparative theology is a growing, mutual understanding in which one learns and is enriched while standing firmly rooted in one’s own faith tradition.

Above I mentioned that the BIRA accepted followers of different religions as co-pilgrims. This common pilgrimage with the adherents of other religions implies that one learns more as one proceeds, and much of this learning takes place via interaction with others. At this point, the FABC emphasises harmony as the ultimate ground of all religions. The pilgrim aspect or the wayfaring aspect opens the possibility of harmony as an eschatological goal which is not yet realised and of which we pilgrims can only speak in relative and non- absolute and non-exclusive notions.

In addition to comparative dialogue with Hindus and Buddhists, the BIRA used the same approach as it arranged dialogue sessions with other major Asian religions. In 1996 separate dialogue sessions were arranged with each religion, although shared discussions with Taoists and Confucians were held.<sup>157</sup> Harmony was the common theme with Taoists and Confucians. In light of the theme of harmony the document produced shows that similarities and differences were studied. The produced document shows that differences were identified but mutual enrichment was also achieved. Harmony was agreed to constitute a common ground among these three religions,

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<sup>156</sup> FIRA II, 3.2., FAPA 3, 127. See here also Wilfred’s affirmation of this distinction between prophetic and mystical approach in note 47, page 79.

<sup>157</sup> BIRA V/4, FAPA 2, 161-165.

although each religion emphasises the concept of harmony in its own particular manner.<sup>158</sup> The dialogue document indicates also that another kind of mutual enrichment took place as a result of the discussion. Jesus' role as the one who opened up a filial relationship between humans and God is one example of a Christian contribution to this dialogue. The filial relationship of Jesus with God in which we can participate is said to be the essence of Christian existence.<sup>159</sup> The term 'filial relationship' is a central principle in Confucianism. Then, the BIRA argues, this principle ought to be put into practice in relationships with one's neighbours. Here, in the Christian perspective, "Christ is the supreme example of this twofold love [love of God and of neighbour] and the source of harmony between God and humans."<sup>160</sup> In this dialogue the church can learn from its partners. The BIRA mentions here "the central value of the family and the importance of social order" as integral parts of Christian life. On the other hand, Christianity's contribution is in fostering a filial relationship with a personal God and also in terms of social order in paying attention to the poor. This dialogue reminds the church of the cosmic dimension of the Christian vocation based on the idea of the cosmic Christ and consequently human harmony with the universe.<sup>161</sup> The document also lists as shared items other deeply ontological and theological observations:

In a special way, Confucianism and Taoism contemplate the unity of the whole universe, with humanity as a part of it. Lao-Tzu presents wu-wei (non-action) as the basic characteristic of Tao and of the true sage. ... Dialogue with Taoist spirituality should inspire Christians to a greater sense of respect for and harmony with nature by reducing the desire to control and through the adoption of a simple way of life. Moreover, the idea of Tao as wu also invites Christians to explore and rediscover the mystical tradition deeply rooted in Christianity. At the same time, the tripersonal God of Christianity that is both hidden and manifest, wu and yu, transcendent and immanent, may find resonance in some of the key concepts in Taoism and help to elucidate these concepts.<sup>162</sup>

Thus, the Church can be helped by Taoism and Confucianism to acquire a life of better harmony with the whole created world. This viewpoint actually affirms the biblical revelation of recapitulation as described by Paul, as the dialogue document notes. The BIRA regrets that

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<sup>158</sup> "The contribution of Confucianism to harmony basically begins from *Jen*. *Jen*, benevolence, in the inner core of the human being, the origin of all human values and the perception of virtues. It is identical with the nature of heaven.... Since harmony is at the core of Confucianism, the maintenance of social stability is of utmost concern." BIRA V/4, 2, FAPA 2, 161-162. "Taoism advocates the pursuit of inner freedom and immortality. Taoists contribute to social harmony, not by interfering with mundane affairs, but remaining in silence." BIRA V/4, 3, FAPA 2, 163. "The notion of harmony, though not the term itself, is a major theme of Christianity. Like "peace", the term can express the sum total of salvation offered by God through Jesus Christ. Christianity teaches a threefold harmony: harmony with God, among humans and with the whole universe. Union with a personal God is viewed as the source of all genuine harmony." BIRA V/4, 5, FAPA 2, 164.

<sup>159</sup> BIRA V/4, 5, FAPA 2, 164.

<sup>160</sup> BIRA V/4, 5, FAPA 2, 164.

<sup>161</sup> BIRA V/4, 6, FAPA 2, 165.

<sup>162</sup> BIRA V/4, 6, FAPA 2, 165.

Christians have neglected this dimension of the Christian revelation for so long, and notes that now the church is reminded of its own precious teaching by representatives of other religions.<sup>163</sup>

Nevertheless, the discussion in the document cited above shows that advancement in religious dialogue with the intention of establishing something valuable (and not simply a few sporadic observations) is painstaking work. The philosophical and ontological substance behind central concepts reveals that for example replacing the Christian concept of God as the Christian revelation understands it with the Chinese Tao is questionable, except perhaps within a strict apophatic framework. That substitution would not, however, satisfy the church and the *sensus fidelium*. Shortcuts and forced easy solutions would not respect genuine differences. The FABC is well aware of this, and consequently they were unable to proceed further in their comparative theological enterprise with those particular participants and questions.<sup>164</sup> This being the fact, where perhaps a common ground among religions can be localised?

#### 4.2.7. Spirituality: A Common Ground among Religions

It appears that spirituality can provide yet another possible area of convergence between religions: “Spirituality- the experience of the divine within the human- can be regarded as the depth dimension of religions while religions can be seen as concrete expressions and the different

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<sup>163</sup> “In addition to the Biblical teaching of harmony of God and humans, St. Paul teaches harmony with the whole creation, especially through the ideal of “recapitulation” – putting all things under Christ as head. Unfortunately, due to their anthropocentric emphasis, Christians have for too long neglected the cosmic dimension of the Christian vocation. In our time, contemporary theologians have restored the idea of a cosmic Christ and stressed human harmony with the universe.” BIRA V/4, 6, FAPA 2, 165.

<sup>164</sup> Many other theologians have wrestled with similar questions, e.g. Korean Heup Young Kim (*Christ and the Tao*, 2010) offers an analysis of the relationship between the Taoist and Christian traditions. Kim parallels the word Tao with Karl Barth’s German word *Weisung*, direction, which in Barth’s text means that God’s command provides a form of practical wisdom. Further, Kim explains that Barth interprets the word *Weisung* to mean both way and wisdom. Chinese character Tao symbolizes a movement, process, or action. Therefore, Tao signifies a sapiential way of life. This interpretation emphasises the orthopraxis which finds correlates in Confucianism and Christian discipleship. Tao itself appears to be a wide, inclusive term. Emphasising the translation of Tao as “the way”, Kim proposes Jesus Christ as the Tao. (John 14:6). He finds this image to be more compatible for Asia than, for example, classical Christological definitions. Christ is not the goal itself, but he is the way to it. Jesus Christ as the Tao also means the right way of life, the way of cosmos, the ideal way of human existence. (Kim 2010, 29-33.) Kim’s book is another example of trying doing theology from “the womb of Asia” (the expression of C.S. Song), putting traditional Christian theological concepts into Asian philosophical and theological categories. The intention is certainly laudable. However, one can ask whether this kind of translating, or transpositioning, of crucial religious and philosophical notions and terms always transfer the essential significance into a new context. To what extent is the Biblical Christ identifiable with Tao?

languages of spirituality.”<sup>165</sup> Thus, in the FIRA’s analysis in this year 2001 document, spirituality constitutes a common ground of all religions in which all religions can meet. Here the FIRA describes two complementary dimensions of integrated spirituality: First, there is “the interpersonal stream, in which the Divine is experienced as a personal being with whom the believer has an I-Thou relationship.”<sup>166</sup> The other dimension is called “the transpersonal stream where the Divine is experienced as ineffable mystery in an I-Self- relationship.”<sup>167</sup> This stream emphasises contemplative mystical experience, but can become too individualistic and turn a blind eye to social injustice. It can also lead to uncritical acceptance of pluralism. The FIRA proposes an interaction between the two streams. In such an interaction both traditions would benefit.<sup>168</sup>

Another source of inspiration for the Church for interreligious dialogue is spirituality of prayer, discipline and meditation. If the Church and Christians deepen their personal experience of mystical union with God and with all creation, it will help interreligious dialogue and relationships. The FIRA posits that this is the heart and soul of interreligious dialogue.<sup>169</sup> Here the document employs the language of divinisation (*theosis*), which is understood as a process rooted in Jesus Christ, and grounded in God, in which human life is transformed into divine life through the power of the Spirit. These exercises and practices free the practitioner from centring on one’s ego and lead one to Real Self, God.<sup>170</sup> Hence, spiritual life and practices are necessary sources of understanding and motivation for interreligious dialogue and relationships. This actually is a primary Asian way of practising not only religion but religious dialogue as well: “Asians prefer to be engaged in contemplation, prayer and ritual rather than busying themselves with mere discussion about prayer

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<sup>165</sup> FIRA IV, 11, FAPA 3, 142.

<sup>166</sup> FIRA IV, 11, FAPA 3, 142. The document characterises this stream as one emphasising social and ethical demands but also being at risk of become exclusivistic. Note here the analysis of Wilfred (n. x) about prophetic and mystical religious traditions. The one referred here belongs to the stream which Wilfred puts into category of religions of Semitic origin, including Christianity.

<sup>167</sup> FIRA IV, 11, FAPA 3, 142. In Wilfred’s typology this model falls within the category of mystical religious traditions.

<sup>168</sup> Wilfred (2005, 238-239) sees a need for a deeper interaction between these paradigms: “The differences [of the two paradigms] are not such as to conclude a basic incompatibility between these two paradigms of religious experience. The possibility for a deeper encounter with our neighbours is possible if we attempt another balancing act by *interpreting the prophetic through the mystical*. I see it as an important task – a task to which the Indian church can make a significant interpretation. This can start already from the Christian Scriptures themselves. As it is, the mystical dimension of the Christian Scriptures is far from being explored. A rereading of the Scriptures from the mystical perspective will help us understand our neighbours and the difficulties they have on the basis of the nature of their religious tradition.” (Emphasis in original). It is noteworthy that Wilfred suggests to approaching the typically ‘Asian’, mystical approach, from the Scriptures. He does not start from Asian philosophies or religions towards the Christian sources, but rather the other way around. In Wilfred’s contention, common ground between religions can therefore be found from two different directions.

<sup>169</sup> FIRA IV, 12, FAPA 3, 142.

<sup>170</sup> “This experience, if pursued faithfully, leads one to “centred living”, centred no longer on the ego, but on the Real Self, the Self in God.” FIRA IV, 12, FAPA 3, 142.

and the Sacred.”<sup>171</sup> A common ground among religions is found on the experiential and spiritual level.

Furthermore, also the question about finding truth is related to spiritual pilgrimage. The search for truth is described as a pilgrimage which seeks truth, harmony and the divine. First, Truth is combined with Harmony and the Divine.<sup>172</sup> Here truth appears as a goal of spiritual pilgrimage which seeks truth, harmony and the divine. Christians find the truth in Jesus, and following him brings one to fullness of life. This pilgrimage is performed as a spiritual pilgrimage together with “sisters and brothers of Asian religions in pursuit of being one in Divine Life.”<sup>173</sup> In this journey Christians also are called to awaken to the ‘all-pervading and all-transcending mystery of the divine’ which is the hallmark of Asian spirituality.<sup>174</sup> In this journey the church also faces the challenge to revitalising the mystical dimension of spirituality, theology and pastoral praxis. This challenge, in turn, calls for a shared contemplative experience which finds that the Divine, God, is the Ever-Beyond, *Deus semper major*.<sup>175</sup> This very Asian approach leads into a form of spirituality that resonates with the Asian psyche, avoiding exclusivism and cultural superiority, “which would betray the message of the Divine kenosis.”<sup>176</sup> This Asian-style of dialogue, the Asian bishops argue, would help the universal Church to “return to its original call”<sup>177</sup>, as many non-Asians today “look up to Asian countries for spiritual inspiration and ethical guidance.” “Interreligious dialogue in Asia is therefore an epochal need of the universal Church.”<sup>178</sup>

In the context of interreligious dialogue and comparative theology, the participants in a 1998 FIRA-meeting speak about “God’s house with many rooms” and “windows and doors open to welcome all peoples”. Further, Christians rooted in Christ ought to “extend branches far and wide to embrace people of different cults, creeds, codes and communities”.<sup>179</sup> God’s approach to the world and to his people is dialogical; God has manifested and continues to manifest Godself in various ways. This is the basis for dialogue, which calls for a dialogical approach from the Church. And this approach puts the Church on a journey of dialogue. The journey of dialogue is led by the Holy Spirit who works in all peoples, cultures and religions. Further, this journey is “to be understood as

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<sup>171</sup>TAC Methodology 5.2.1., FAPA 3, 411.

<sup>172</sup> FEISA 7.1.1., FAPA 2, 59. Here all terms written in capital first letters in original.

<sup>173</sup> FEISA 7.2.1., FAPA 2, 60.

<sup>174</sup> FEISA 7.2.3., FAPA 2, 60.

<sup>175</sup> FEISA 7.2.3. FAPA 2, 60.

<sup>176</sup> FEISA 7.4.2., FAPA 2, 61.

<sup>177</sup> FEISA 7.5.1., FAPA 2, 61.

<sup>178</sup> FEISA 7.5.2., FAPA 2, 61.

<sup>179</sup> FIRA I, 2.2., FAPA 3, 120.

a pilgrimage to the Divine or Sacred, however that Divine or Sacred is named. In this pilgrimage all peoples are caught up: we Christians, as well as Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, Sikhs, etc., those who seek meaning in life, those who search for truth.”<sup>180</sup> The notion of truth of course brings with it the question about possible areas of convergence among religions. Here, the document seems to imply that the FIRA sees at least the search for truth as a common ground and area of convergence. This view also implies the oft-repeated wayfaring and pilgrim aspects in the FABC’s documents. It appears that in the FABC’s view all major Asian religions share a common understanding of pursuit of truth and the Absolute in terms of a journey. Religions, or rather practitioners of religions, meet each other on the road on a common pilgrimage. The FABC does not, however, rest content only with meeting with others on the same ground. Pilgrimage initiates a process which brings participants closer to one another with the hope of getting closer to the inner core, a spirituality which unites and actually precipitates dialogue. The FIRA describes this process as being like ‘peeling an onion’ in which outer layers of rituals and traditions give way to the inner core. In this process, an encounter with God who is ahead of us and ahead of religions, languages and systems becomes possible.<sup>181</sup> Here the document also posits that this process involves change and that can also cause pain and anxiety. One’s religious identity and certainty seem to be at risk. These observations are noteworthy; as the Federation seeks to expand its own understanding, it accepts risks and uncertainties. The search for a better comprehension of truth drives and motivates Asian bishops in their pilgrimage. For them it seems to be the most appropriate way to become as Asian a Church as possible.

In summary, although the Federation does not find enough substantial material between religions to argue that they all teach and ultimately are representations of the same ontological reality beyond them all, the bishops do identify certain common characteristics which make dialogue between religions possible. The most important are a search for truth, an emphasis on harmony, similarities in spiritual practices and the idea of one’s spiritual life as pilgrimage. This pilgrimage is described as a dialogical and harmonious spiritual pilgrimage along with adherents of other religions. This approach represents a very Asian way of perceiving the relationships between religions. By this, the Church assumes an Asian, harmonious face. This approach is also one indicator of the Asian Catholic Church’s becoming truly Asian and finding its own identity.

Thus, the efforts of the FABC towards constructing comparative theology indicate a serious effort to create an Asian contextual theology. The Asian contexts continuously propose challenges to

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<sup>180</sup> FIRA I, 2.5., FAPA 3, 120.

<sup>181</sup> FIRA I, 2.6., FAPA 3, 120-121.

which the Asian bishops respond. Here, when encountering the rich Asian religious traditions, the FABC attempts to articulate a constructive theology in which Asian religions provide substantial material for interaction and comparison with the Church's traditional theological *loci*: the Scripture and the Tradition. The seriousness with which the Asian bishops studied Asian religions becomes even more evident when we examine how the bishops have attended these religions from the perspective of the possible work of the Holy Spirit in them. Here it can be asked can Christian pneumatology be enriched with the help of other religions? This is another perspective to comparative theology. This matter will be the focus of the next subchapter.

#### **4.2.8. Does the Wind of the Holy Spirit Blow in Other Religions?**

In 1997 The Office of Theological Concerns produced a lengthy document entitled *The Spirit at Work in Asia Today*.<sup>182</sup> The fact that this treatise was written by theological experts, together with its length suggests that Asian bishops regard pneumatology as an important element in an Asian compatible contextual theology. Previous research on the FABC's documents has noted the pneumatological theology of the FABC.<sup>183</sup> Therefore it is not imperative to discuss it extensively here. In this subchapter I will pay attention only to the ways in which pneumatology is utilised in the comparative theological approach of the OTC.<sup>184</sup> This approach will broaden the perspective of how the Federation assesses other religions from a specifically theological perspective.

First, following *Gaudium et spes* 22, the OTC document assures its readers "that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to everyone the possibility of being associated with this Paschal mystery."<sup>185</sup> Immediately after citing this conciliar text, the OTC continues by arguing that they intend to discern the presence of the Spirit in Asia's religious-cultural traditions as they express, believe, image and symbolise it themselves.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> FAPA 3, 237-327

<sup>183</sup> See e.g. Mendoza (2008), *A Church in Dialogue with Peoples of Other Faiths: A Journey to the Kingdom in the Spirit* and Varayilan (2008), *Spirit and the Pilgrim Church*.

<sup>184</sup> For a clear presentation on a pneumatological reflections on other religious traditions, see Mendoza 2008, 194-221. He concludes that the Spirit who is present also in other traditions is at the heart of the FABC's respect for and appreciation of other religious traditions.

<sup>185</sup> OTC 1, FAPA 3, 238.

<sup>186</sup> OTC, 1, FAPA 3, 239.

At the outset, then, the OTC seems to be certain of the presence of the Spirit in Asia's religious-cultural traditions and wants to discern it in a comparative way, by learning from these traditions. In a manner similar to what the BIRA did earlier<sup>187</sup>, the OTC analyses each of the major Asian religions one by one. With regard to Hinduism, the OTC first introduces a few central concepts which, in the OTC's view, could resonate with the way in which the Holy Spirit is understood in Christianity. After analysing these central concepts of Hinduism, the OTC introduces the following terms as possibly useful for Christians: *Prana* (Breath), *Antarayamin* ("the inner controller" or "indweller"), *Ananda* ("bliss" or "joy"), *Sakti* ("power", "energy"), *Agni* ("fire", also as *Pavaka*, "purifier")

In early Hinduism *Prana* was understood metaphysically and is identified with life.<sup>188</sup> The OTC document also notes that this term brings to mind the biblical terms *ruah* and *pneuma*: the meaning of *Prana* is argued to be approximately the same as the Hebrew *ruah* and the Greek *pneuma*. The FABC theologians find it strange that Indian Christian theology has not considered using this term in their pneumatology.<sup>189</sup>

Another concept which resonates with Christian pneumatology is *Antarayamin*. It signifies an immanent being which leads the individual soul to salvation. In the OTC's view, it is a dynamic being that resonates with the Christian understanding of the Spirit as interpreted by St. Paul in Romans 8.<sup>190</sup>

*Ananda* in Hinduism is an ontological characteristic of Brahman together with *sat* (being) and *cit* (consciousness). The OTC finds resonance in this concept with a Christian understanding of joy as a gift from the Spirit. According to the OTC, in later Hindu tradition the concepts of *ananda*, *sat* and *cit* have merged together in the term *saccidananda*<sup>191</sup>. and the Indian Christian tradition has adopted this triple term to signify the mystery of the Holy Spirit. Here, *sat* (being) means the Father,

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<sup>187</sup> See the documents of BIRA VI (1992), BIRA V/2 (1994), BIRA V/3 (1995), BIRA V/4 (1996) and BIRA V/5 (1996) in FAPA 2, 143-171.

<sup>188</sup> OTC 1.1.2., FAPA 3, 239. The text also notes that later this metaphysical connotation was lost and the term began to be used in its literal sense in yoga exercise: control of breath. A very important concept *atman* does not resonate with the Christian understanding of the Spirit. The OTC translates it as "the Self" or "the ultimate Divine subject". Its meaning is the ultimate Reality or the Absolute and thus is not capable of being used to signify the Holy Spirit. The OTC is critical of the fact that term is nonetheless used in North India together with the adjective *pavitra* ("pure", "sacred") for the Holy Spirit.

<sup>189</sup> OTC 1.1.2. FAPA 3, 239.

<sup>190</sup> OTC, 1.1.3., FAPA 3, 239. The OTC document does not provide the exact reference to the verses of Romans 8.

<sup>191</sup> According to Selvanayagam (2008, 52) the Hindu thinker Keshab Chunder Sen (1838-84) was the first person to expound the meaning of Trinity by using the Vedantic category of Brahman as *Saccidananda*. Selvanayagam argued that Jesus was originally as Asian before he was made a European. In his opinion the Western image of Jesus and the church were hindrances to revealing the true person of Jesus. He also identified the Vedantic Brahman with the Logos.



*cit* (consciousness) signifies the Word, and *ananda* signifies the Holy Spirit.<sup>192</sup> In the OTC's opinion, the concepts of *ananda* will especially enrich the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit.<sup>193</sup>

Thus, the OTC detects at least terminological similarities between Hinduism and Christianity. The OTC maintains that the Spirit and the signs of the Spirit can be discerned in the Indian tradition. This makes "the history of Hinduism a Holy history, where the Spirit has led our brothers and sisters to the depths of the mystery of God and leads them towards Christ."<sup>194</sup> Thus, it seems that in the view of the Asian bishops Christian theology can be enriched by Hinduism, at least terminologically. And this, in turn, can make Christian theology more accessible and more "Asian" in Asia.

As the OTC explores whether one can discern the work of the Holy Spirit in Buddhism their first reaction is negative: "One cannot talk about a concept of the "Spirit" in Buddhism and any attempt to do so, or to try to "find the idea of the Spirit in Buddhism", would be an exercise in distortion of the very essence of Buddhism."<sup>195</sup> The OTC further observes that Buddhism has to be understood and taken within its own framework, which does not hold room for a Spirit or a personal God. The basic motivation of Buddhism is the desire to attain Enlightenment, and the way to Enlightenment is about walking the right way of *Dharma* and experiencing it. The OTC then notes the two basic concepts of Buddhism, *anatma* ("No soul", "no self" or "own being") and the rejection of a personal God. A Buddhist would agree with the concepts of *karma-samsara* and the idea of rebirths, but would regard it as illusory to assume a permanent, enduring self (*atman*) which passes from one life to the next.<sup>196</sup>

Where, then, is a possible meeting point or common ground with Christianity? The OTC finds a meeting point not on the conceptual level but "on the level of experience of human life and the

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<sup>192</sup> OTC 1.1.1.-1.1.4., FAPA 3, 239-240. It is beyond my competence to assess whether these translations and substitutions for the Holy Spirit represent the traditional Christian concepts of the persons of the Trinity. However, it should be remembered that when creating contextual and indigenous theology in vernacular, the translators normally pick up the vocabulary which already exist in the particular language. Translation always involves a risk of losing something of the original meaning, or even what is intended to be transmitted.

<sup>193</sup> OTC 1.1.4., FAPA 3, 240. The two remaining terms, *sakti* and *agni*, can also enrich the Christian pneumatology. *Sakti* as power and energy can help understand the work of the Spirit. *Agni* can mean both fire and wind, thus they naturally resonance with traditional pneumatology.

<sup>194</sup> OTC 1.1.7., FAPA 3, 241-242.

<sup>195</sup> OTC 1.2.1, FAPA 3, 242.

<sup>196</sup> OTC 1.2.1., FAPA 3, 243.

human quest for the transcendent.”<sup>197</sup> The OTC discovers an argument for this meeting point in the fact that both Buddhism and Christianity affirm the existence of the transcendent, and that there exists a spiritual world beyond the physical senses and the rational mind. Hence, “the meeting point will be beyond concepts, dogmas, symbols and rituals at the level of experience.”<sup>198</sup> The document concludes its discussion of Buddhism with a rhetoric question suggesting that Buddhism has produced plentiful good fruits such as “Sympathetic Love, Compassion, Joy and Peace of Mind in the lives of millions of Asia’s people.”<sup>199</sup> These experienced good fruits, the OTC suggests, must be of the Spirit.

After this overview, a couple of observations can be made. First, does the OTC hold that Christianity and Buddhism can find a meeting point on the transcendental level based on pneumatology? The answer to this question appears to be negative, despite the point that both faith systems accept a concept of the transcendent. However, coming to agreement on the ontological ‘content’ of the transcendent cannot be reached. There are no common concepts for describing this transcendent, only an agreement that it ‘is’ beyond the physical senses and the rational mind. In terms of liberation or salvation, both faith systems affirm that human beings are oriented to and capable of transcending their ‘common’ physical and rational capabilities.<sup>200</sup> Here, in dialogue with Buddhism, the OTC therefore does not appear to agree with the perennialist understanding of the

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<sup>197</sup> OTC, 1.2.1, FAPA 3, 243.

<sup>198</sup> OTC, 1.2.1., FAPA 3, 243.

<sup>199</sup> OTC 1.2.5. FAPA 3, 248.

<sup>200</sup> Above I referred to the assertion of *Tilakaratne* (2004, 391) who in his article criticises Aloysius Pieris for diminishing the substantial differences between Buddhism and Christianity, because Pieris suggests that the primordial liberative core is the common belief of all religions. This core is distinct from religions’ rites, laws, institutions, traditions and also distinct from philosophical, ideological and cultural interpretations of religions. In *Tilakaratne’s* opinion, suggesting ‘the primordial liberative core’ as the common ground suggests no more than “the idea common to all religions that the present situation of human being is not satisfactory and that there must be a liberation from that situation.” *Tilakaratne* 2004, 391. He observes that the meaning of liberation can be quite different, especially in theistic and non-theistic religions. Pieris has attempted to identify divergences and possible convergences between Buddhism and Christianity in his book *Love Meets Wisdom. A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (1988). In it (p. 85) Pieris posits that Buddhism and Christianity “are two irreducibly distinct languages of the Spirit, each incapable without the other of adequately mediating and expressing one’s experience of God and of the world.” In Pieris’ analysis, the language of Buddhism is that of liberative knowledge (gnosis) and of Christianity that of redemptive love (agape). Both languages are results of the same human spirit and the divine Spirit and also are legitimate languages. *Tilakaratne* argues that Pieris reads too much into the possibility of having the same experience. *Tilakaratne* analyses Pali language Buddhist terms and maintains that Pieris’ interpretation of Gnostic connotations in the analysed terms generally is not justified. Pieris seems to read too much transcendental content into them. Ontological and substantial differences between the two religions in question here, he argues, are more profound than Pieris seems to suggest. *Tilakaratne* 2004, 388-390. Recently Pieris has revisited the theme in his article “*The Holy Spirit and Asia’s Religiousness*” (2007). In this article Pieris raises a question about problematics of assuming that the same Spirit is behind theistic and non-theistic religions. How is it understandable to assert that the Holy Spirit spoke via a religion which does not accept the existence of the Spirit at all?

common ‘ground’ of religions, which does not respect the real differences between religions.<sup>201</sup>

The OTC’s stand here is actually quite on the contrary to that; “Buddhism must be taken on its own terms and understood within the framework of its own concepts.”<sup>202</sup> On the other hand, the OTC does not seem to support pure constructivism in which religious experiences are solely dependent on the experiencing subject’s cultural, religious, linguistic or other contingent variables. A genuine, shared religious experience of the Transcendent is possible across different religious traditions. But his Transcendent cannot be encapsulated in a specific definitive and exclusive language pattern or in conceptual notions. Thus, in a certain sense the OTC’s position here seems to fall somewhere between the perennialist and constructivist position.

Moreover, the passage cited above about the spiritual nourishment and fruits produced by Buddhism testifies to the activity of the Spirit in Buddhism. This is clearly a conclusion reached by the OTC themselves, not a common agreement with Buddhists. Here the obvious criterion is the fruits of the Spirit, clearly discernible by the good fruits produced by Buddhism. Thus, in response to the title of this chapter: “Does the Holy Spirit blow in Asian religions”, regarding Buddhism the FABC theologians eventually answer affirmatively, although the concept of a personal Spirit in the Christian theistic understanding does not belong to the Buddhist vocabulary. The FABC’s, cautious, affirmative answer is possible despite the differences between the two religions. It is based on the robust conviction that Holy Spirit is active outside of the Church and the boundaries of the Church. This acknowledgement does not lead the FABC to a forced consensus around presumed or even proved similarities between the two religions. Perhaps an Asian mindset and worldview, which

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<sup>201</sup> Robert Forman (1990, 3-43) discusses the question about differences between religions in the framework of mystical experience. First he explains how constructive interpretation of mystical experience challenged a perennialist understanding of mystical experience. Perennialist held that mystical experience represents an immediate and direct contact with an absolute principle. This absolute principle was defined differently depending on the philosophy or religion. In this understanding mysticism is generally transculturally homogenous, independent of the subject’s beliefs, concepts, and expectations. Constructivism, in turn, maintains that all human experiences, religious and otherwise, are for the most part formed, shaped, mediated, and constructed by the terms, categories, beliefs and linguistic structures of an experiencing subject. Forman posits that also the constructivist paradigm does not explain mystical experience in an adequate manner. He further argues that “Pure Consciousness Event” (PCE, “wakeful contentless consciousness”) occurs and is reported in many religious and philosophical traditions. These experiences of PCE are utterly homogenous. But then, it is plausible that representatives of different religions give different names to this similar experience, specific to one’s own tradition. Against the constructivist position Forman argues that not all experiences are constructed. Richard King (1999, 167-168) contends that the perennialist position has failed to take account of the sense in which mystical experiences are conditioned by the socioreligious and cultural context in which they occur. For example, Jewish mystical experiences are conditioned by the particular faith convictions of Judaism (e.g. the existence of personal God who created the world and humankind, God enters into covenants with humans, God and humans are ontologically distinct, the Torah and the Commandments are the most perfect expression of God’s will, etc.) whereas in Buddhist mysticism, in contrast, mystical experiences are conditioned by the four noble truths.

<sup>202</sup> OTC, 1.2.1, FAPA 3, 242.

builds on complementarity and seeks harmony, contributes to this understanding. Real differences do not destroy Asian harmony that tries to accommodate all authentic Asian expressions of faith. Here again, the impetus to become as Asian as possible surfaces as one of the key interpretive underpinnings of the FABC's theology. The Church in Asia should become The Church of Asia in all things.

The OTC then moves on to discussion of Confucianism and Taoism. After analysis, the OTC comes to a conclusion that also their moral and spiritual values for humankind's search for peace reflect the workings of the Holy Spirit. Further, their "virtues of docility, trust, humility, non-violence, detachment, equanimous love, responsibility, honesty, loyalty and fidelity are fruits of the Spirit of God" who works "in all sorts of different ways in different people in the world."<sup>203</sup>

At this stage it seems clear that Asian bishops understand the work of the Holy Spirit in a very broad manner. By this they certainly subscribe to the Vatican II theology that the Spirit is active outside of the boundaries of the Church and the specific Christian revelation. By accepting the active presence of the Holy Spirit in other religions, we can ask if the Asian bishops actually propose an 'anonymous pneumatology' as a theological answer to the question of the experienced good in other religions on the one hand, and to the bishops' theological conviction of God's universal salvific will on the other hand.

The Asian bishops seem to acknowledge the existing differences between faith traditions. This obviously means that if the FABC maintains the very clear distinction between them, (especially with regard to understanding of theism vs. non-theism) it seems like an uphill task to find a relation between them as united within one all-embracing worldview. For instance, Buddhism and Christianity seem to constitute two different, and perhaps parallel, systems of salvation which cannot be substantially harmonised.<sup>204</sup> On the other hand, arguing that the good discerned in other

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<sup>203</sup> OTC 1.3.2.4. FAPA 3, 257.

<sup>204</sup> Sottocornola and De Giorgi (2010, 454-458) suggest a number of necessary and sufficient conditions for interaction between Buddhism and Christianity. Their approach is Christian, and they build on Vatican II document *Ad gentes* (3) which speaks about God's plan to gather all human beings into one family through Christ. Christ's universal role, however, is not of domination or superiority. On the contrary, Christ's kenosis is God's gift for all. In this approach the Church does not see Buddhism's teaching as contradicting that of Jesus but rather as harmonious with it. This approach is also possible because of the seeds of the Word and the germinal presence of the Spirit in Buddhism. This presence is affirmed by the fruits of the Holy Spirit in Buddhism, waiting for fulfilment in Christ. So this model clearly represents the standard fulfilment paradigm. On the other hand, the authors also search for a possible contribution of Buddhism to Christianity. They suggest two: "First, the apophatic nature of Buddhism can interact with the Semitic language of the biblical tradition and help Christianity to overcome the danger of too anthropomorphic way of thinking about God. The apophatic approach to the question of God, as developed by Meister Eckhart or by Ruysbroeck, or also by St John of the Cross or even St. Thomas of Aquinas will be challenged to new pursuits and new depths by the interaction of Christian theology with Buddhism. ... Such deepening will be the result, especially, of a

religions is fruit of the Holy Spirit reveals that the FABC's comparative and dialogical approach to other religions ultimately has an inclusivist flavour. At least, the FABC interprets and explain the good detected in other religions within the framework of Christian theology. Thus, at least a cautious suggestion of an "anonymous pneumatology" regarding the FABC's thinking can perhaps be made.<sup>205</sup>

Lastly the OTC compares Christianity with primal religions and Islam. First, the OTC rejects the pejorative practice of regarding the leaders and adherents of primal religions as being under the influence of evil spirits. The OTC observes: "Christians are not only called to evangelise indigenous peoples but must be evangelised by them ... Since much of the indigenous people's worldview and ethos is compatible with the Christian faith, traditional beliefs, rites, myths and symbols of indigenous peoples provide material for developing indigenous theologies and liturgical ceremonies."<sup>206</sup> Thus, the OTC accepts the fact that good fruits of God's Spirit are present in the primal religions.

With regard to Islam, the OTC resoundingly affirms the activity of God's Spirit: "The Divine Spirit, who works unceasingly to renew the face of the universe is also active in the religion of Islam to produce the Spirit's inimitable fruits in the lives of the Muslims. In recognising the signs of the Spirit's activity in Islam, as elsewhere, Christians praise and glorify the Holy Spirit for its wondrous works."<sup>207</sup> After this affirmation the document goes on to elaborate the fruits of the Spirit's activity in Islam.<sup>208</sup> After discussing them, the document concludes that "not everything done by Muslims is inspired by the work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>209</sup> But, in the view of the OTC, the same is true with Christians and other religions, too. The "Evil Spirit" tries to destroy and negate the work of the

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Buddhist-Christian dialogue on the concept of person. The Buddhist *sunyata*, interacting with the Christian concept of person as part of God's own revelation (human identity as seen in the light of God's own identity) will push Christian theology forward toward a more relational understanding of a person. As the Trinity is subsistent in the three relations constitutive of the three Divine Persons, so will human identity be seen more in a sort of relational identity, where "self emptying", understood in terms of love and otherness, will contribute to further define both human and divine personality. ... Second, the renewal of *theo*-logy in dialogue with Buddhism will find the kenosis of Christ its most challenging point. Here the death of Christ, which Christians have always felt to be the center of God's revelation, will find in the Buddhist theory of *sunyata* and the kenotic nature of awakening and *nirvana* itself a new challenge." Sottocornola and De Giorgi, 2010, 457-458.

<sup>205</sup> D'Costa (2009, 18) discusses the differences between the concept of anonymous Christ and anonymous Spirit by referring to Roger Haight and George Khodr. D'Costa posits that these two theologians emphasise the presence of the Spirit in other religions as endorsement of them being God-given and God-inspired. D'Costa sees this as problematic and asks pointedly: "[i]t is not clear why an "anonymous Christ" is imperialistic but an "anonymous Spirit" is not. "

<sup>206</sup> OTC 1.4.3. FAPA 3, 261.

<sup>207</sup> OTC 1.5., FAPA 3, 261.

<sup>208</sup> OTC 1.5.1., FAPA 3, 261-264. Here the OTC refers to the list of the fruits of the Holy Spirit as listed by Paul and asks where Muslims have learned them and what motivates them to produce them. An inspiration is found in Qur'an.

<sup>209</sup> OTC 1.5.3., FAPA 3, 266.

Holy Spirit, and this has led to many unvirtuous practices. The OTC concludes the comparison with Islam by observing that recognition of “the many profoundly beautiful and good elements of the religion of Islam, Christians are neither compromising nor belittling their own faith. Rather, they are discovering some of the many and varied gifts so lavishly bestowed by the Spirit on the human family. By forming friendships with Muslims, by coming to know better their faith and practices, and by working together with them for good, it is God’s Holy Spirit who is praised and worshipped.”<sup>210</sup>

The document “The Spirit at Work in Asia” is a lengthy text. Having first analysed different factors and phenomena present in Asia and after comparing them with the Christian faith, the OTC theologians towards the end of the document attempt to draw conclusions under the heading “Asian Approach to the Divine Mystery through the Spirit.” The title is telling; it again shows a salient and perennial thrust of the Asian bishops: how to express Christian faith and theology in an Asian-compatible manner? The OTC concludes its discussion by contending that all Asia agrees that the Divine can never be expressed fully and adequately. This Divine mystery can be named as the Spirit, which is “intimately present in all that we are and tend to be, and yet it cannot be comprehended and its ways cannot be circumscribed and delimited within our scheme of things. “It blows where it wills (Jn. 3:8)”.<sup>211</sup> Then the OTC pays attention to the possibility of viewing the Spirit from a personalist perspective. The document notes that it is possible but that there is a risk of perceiving the Spirit in a one-sided, anthropocentric way; this needs to be complemented by a traditional Asian heritage containing cosmic and bio-centred dimensions. The Spirit unites and integrates; it is also a movement of wholeness which breaks down divisions, barriers and compartmentalisations. This same Spirit also pulsates through the whole universe, and its power can be discerned in the struggles against threats in Asia. Moreover, the OTC also notes that the Spirit manifests its life and power in manifold ways of which one particular is the mystery of Jesus Christ. A pneumatological approach to this mystery helps the Church in interpreting the Christian tradition in Asia and in integrating contemporary experiences harmoniously into the Christian faith. Here again, Asian contexts (on in this particular point interpreted pneumatologically) provide material for theological reflection. Finally, the OTC maintains that plurality of cultures, languages, ways of thoughts and religions of Asia is handiwork of the Spirit. This pluralism is actually a great gift of the Spirit. This view justifies Asian complementarity and tolerance. Here the OTC also speaks about “receptive pluralism” which indicates the different ways in which people respond to the

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<sup>210</sup> OTC 1.5.3. FAPA 3, 266.

<sup>211</sup> OTC 5.2. FAPA 3, 318.

promptings of the Spirit. Such receptive pluralism results in pluralism of religions, cultures and worldviews. In turn, this prompts and motivates the Asian Churches to open up their horizons and to foster deeper relationships with the neighbours of other faiths.<sup>212</sup>

What the Asian bishops have learned from Asian religions also affects their theological methodology. Importance of Asian values, mindsets and ‘Asian-ness’ in general has been discussed above; here I will pay attention to the notion of the *sensus plenior*, “surplus meaning” of a scriptural text as introduced by the OTC. They explain its meaning as “the surplus of meaning that God, the “totally other” Author of the Scriptures intended to convey, through providential indications in the text, to future readers in their own contexts, which could be quite different from the context of the original readers.”<sup>213</sup> The OTC employs the term as they compare the Bible and the Confucian classics. They suggest that in searching for surplus meaning the reader discovers material which complements the mere literal meaning. Interestingly, the method is proposed for interreligious reading of the sacred texts of another religion by which the reader can discover surplus meaning in that religion’s text without usurping that particular text for purposes that are foreign to that text. So a Christian reader can discover “surplus” meaning not merely in his/her own Bible but also in Confucian texts, and vice-versa.<sup>214</sup>

The notion of the *sensus plenior* seems to have been used deliberately. The OTC refers to the history of the Church<sup>215</sup> and then remarks that Vatican II focused on historicity. They note: “The Christ-event is historical and has been understood, preached and written down in a historical process. Since the event in question is grace-filled and can never be imprisoned in a particular version (be it inspired), any sincere reader, by reading the inspired text about the grace-filled event can always grasp new meanings that have never been expressed deep enough.”<sup>216</sup>

This above passage seems to imply a relativizing of one authoritative interpretation of the Christ-event. It is historical, but no single interpretation or theological system can encapsulate and

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<sup>212</sup> OTC 5.2.-5.4, FAPA 3, 318-322.

<sup>213</sup> OTC, Methodology 4.1.3., FAPA 3, 366-367. The term is explained by Raymond E. Brown (1955, 92): “That additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a biblical text (or group of texts, or even a whole book) when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation.”

<sup>214</sup> OTC Methodology 4.5.2.4. FAPA 3, 394.

<sup>215</sup> Allegorical reading by the Alexandrians in early Patristic period, the Benedictine *lectio divina* and the Scholastic tradition which read the Scriptures with the eyes of philosophers (e.g. Aristotle) are mentioned as examples of *sensus plenior* reading. An example of the latter is the Scholastic axiom *gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit*. OTC Methodology 4.5.3. FAPA 3, 394.

<sup>216</sup> OTC Methodology 4.5.3. FAPA 3, 394.

absolutise it decisively. Here the *sensus plenior* reading, even interreligiously and cross-textually, “can give rise to a new and fruitful understanding of the life-truths.”<sup>217</sup>

It can be asserted that the FABC’s motivation for religious dialogue in comparative manner is not merely academic and scientific. On the one hand, the Asian religions are imperative and unavoidable dialogue partners because of their presence in Asia. On the other hand, however, a theologically more important motivation is pneumatological. The Asian bishops are willing to listen and discern the guidance and promptings of the Holy Spirit in Asian contextual realities and to learn from them; specifically from the religions of Asia. Comparative approach is a means towards it. This all will help the Church to become more Asian and better incarnated. Moreover, it seems that the FABC has undertaken comparative approaches under the guidance of the Spirit and with the conviction that God uses the plurality of religions in revealing more of Godself. In the last analysis, the Asian Church sees herself being as a co-pilgrim on the same path with adherents of the other Asian religions. The FABC journeys this path within the Christian paradigm, but accepts that the other co-pilgrims tell their ‘stories’ using other concepts. But the paradigm of being on the path does not require them to draw conclusive judgements of the truth of other religions. “The Way is made by walking” -paradigm is again an important interpretative horizon here.

#### **4.2.9. FABC: What Kind of Theology of Religions?**

After the above analysis, we must ask where the FABC stands on the much-debated issue of the theology of religions, especially with regards to the use of the three terms “exclusivism”, “inclusivism” and “pluralism”.<sup>218</sup> Thus, this subchapter will summarise the FABC theology of religions.

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<sup>217</sup> OTC, Methodology 4.5.3., FAPA 3, 395. Gispert-Sauch (2014, 489-490) introduces Francis Clooney as a pioneer of “The New Comparative Theology” and presents Clooney’s method as one which is “less concerned with a theological definition of the status of these [other religions’] scriptures but to enter into the practice of a parallel spiritual reading of them with the texts from the biblical or Christian sources.” This will enrich mutual understanding and a spiritual symbiosis will take place.

<sup>218</sup> Paul F. Knitter in his seminal book *Introducing Theology of Religions* (2002) categorises different positions as follows: the replacement model (exclusivism), the fulfilment model (inclusivism), the mutuality model which stresses the universal validity of religions without recognising the real particular differences between them; and the acceptance model, which embraces religious plurality and diversity. This model acknowledges that the religious traditions of the world are different and we have to accept those differences. Knitter contends that “...manyness of God, for Christians, can never be absorbed into unity or oneness, so the diversity and plurality of religions can never be reduced to final unity and similarity.” Knitter 2002, 221. Knitter also posits that in reality we are all inclusivists; this means that we always view, hear, and understand the other religious person from our own religious perspective. We always include others in what we hold to be true and valuable, in what we already are. We just have to be aware of



Based on what has been examined above, perhaps the three-category division of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism is not helpful for discerning the rightful intention of the FABC in this matter. In his 2008 doctoral dissertation Ruben Mendoza has analysed the FABC's theology of religions.<sup>219</sup> In my view he is correct in his analysis when he contends that regarding the relationship with other religions, the FABC's starting point is not the Scripture and Tradition, although they guide the FABC's discernment in this matter. Rather, the starting point is the existential reality in which the Church lives in a minority situation heavily influenced by other religious traditions.<sup>220</sup> Methodologically, then, the approach of the FABC is primarily inductive:

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what we are and confess it. Knitter 2002, 217-218. More recently the validity of the said three categories do justice for all position of theology of religions. Nowadays it is customary to add other categories, i.e. post-pluralism into the definitions. This latter seeks to take each religion in its own terms, respecting the differences without harmonising them by force.

Gavin D'Costa criticises Knitter's argumentation. In D'Costa's analysis, Knitter represents Liberative-Praxis oriented pluralism because he argues that all religions are to be judged as to their truthfulness, in so far as they promote the "kingdom." In Knitter's view the kingdom is not exclusively a Christian possession, but it is a lifestyle characterised by justice and peace. D'Costa further proves that Knitter wants to steer clear of affirming the church, Christ, or God as normative criteria for truth, since these kind of assertions contradict our present experience. This experience consists of the relativity of all revelations and religious truth claims, the truth and goodness of other religions, the encounter with believers of other religions who also claim that their experience of revelation is for all times and peoples, and the demands of dialogue without a prepackaged final word. In D'Costa's view, Knitter has been influenced by the theology of religions of some Asian theologians, whose basic position is similar to Knitter's in their identity as liberation theology. Here D'Costa mentions e.g. Aloysius Pieris and Felix Wilfred.

D'Costa also suspects Knitter of relativism: Knitter seems to imply that God's self-disclosure is true only for Christians. For D'Costa, however, if Jesus Christ is God's eschatological self-disclosure, this revelation is true whether it is accepted or not. Knitter's emphasis on the "kingdom" as indicating the presence of the Holy Spirit in other religions and them as God-given and inspired without having at least an anonymous Christ present, suggests a rupture within the Trinity. Somehow the Spirit is ontologically independent of the Son and the Son's actions are somehow independent of the Spirit's activity. D'Costa also sees that this approach introduces a separation between the kingdom of God and the person of Jesus. It makes the kingdom a product of human good actions rather than a reality brought about through following Jesus Christ. D'Costa argues that this Knitter's position is unbiblical and possibly Pelagian. D'Costa concludes his analysis of Knitter (and other pluralists) that pluralism is an outcome of a methodological revolution within Christian theology whereby non-theological considerations determine theological discourse. Different epistemologies (D'Costa mentions Kantian, Marxist, Historicist, Colonialist, Feminist, and Postmodern) have caused a revision in the doctrines of faith: Christology, Spirit, God, Church and mission have been transformed or reconfigured. In D'Costa's view, pluralism fails to stand in continuity with the dogmatic task of the Church because it does not begin from revelation and the ecclesial tradition. D'Costa 2010, 329-344.

Elements of D'Costa's critique can be applied to the FABC's theology. While holding to revelation and ecclesial tradition, since its inception the FABC has argued that a new approach to doing theology in Asian contexts is required. D'Costa's demand to begin the dogmatic task from revelation and the ecclesial tradition does not necessarily give much weight to the context. Here the context and contextual realities provide only the background against which the Christian message is applied, while in the FABC's contextual theology the context is embraced as a *locus theologicus*, material for theological argumentation. Thus, the importance of context for FABC seems to be significantly greater than what D'Costa suggests.

<sup>219</sup> *A Church in Dialogue with Peoples of Other Faiths: A Journey to the Kingdom in the Spirit. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences 1970-2007*. 2008. Louvain. Interestingly, Mendoza analyses FABC's theology of religions against positions of Knitter and D'Costa. If one wishes to categorise FABC's position in the theology of religions, it seems to me that the most applicable place would be that of inclusive pluralism, the concept introduced by Dupuis in his *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. However, the FABC's contextual approach does not fall easily within these standard categories.

<sup>220</sup> Mendoza 2008, 64-65.

the context in the theological enterprise of the Asian bishops becomes first. However, the ‘raw material’ gained from this exercise is then put into dialogue with the first two theological loci, Scripture and Tradition. This introduces a more traditional, deductive approach to doing theology.<sup>221</sup> The “Asian pilgrim” creates his/her theology in a continuous dialogical praxis between the context and the more traditional material of theology. This approach can also clearly be seen in the FABC’s harmonious and complementary attitude towards other religions, which embraces pluralism as an existing fact. The Asian bishops take this stance without denying the specific significance of Jesus, the unique Saviour. In the context of plurality or religions, the FABC does not wish to use exclusive and “non-Asian” expressions which would imply an unwished foreignness in Asian contexts.<sup>222</sup> Nonetheless, in the end there is an inclusivist flavour in the FABC’s theology of

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<sup>221</sup> A robust, and in my opinion correct, summary of the FABC’s contextual theological methodology is presented by Jonathan Tan (2003). He examines the criteria for its authenticity and credibility. Tan cautions that there is always a risk of using praxis as the principal criterion for the authenticity of theological reflection. This would imply the absence of external criteria, and this can lead theology into mere ideology. External criteria outside of the praxis of a community are needed for assessing and judging the authenticity and credibility. Here Tan introduces the vertical and horizontal dimensions of theology as a means of judging the authenticity and credibility of a theology.

“The vertical dimension of the FABC’s contextual theological methodology refers to its internal coherence with the deeply profound and rich heritage of 2000 years of diverse and pluralistic ways of doing theologies within the Catholic theological tradition which is handed down from one generation to another, while its horizontal dimension refers to its external coherence with a local community’s experiences and actions which are being carried out in specific local multireligious, multiethnic, multilingual and pluricultural Asian contexts. To the extent that the FABC’s contextual theological methodology is authentic and credible, it should be able to define, articulate and uphold in a holistic manner the hyphenated character of all Asian local churches: all Asian local churches are authentically Christian yet truly Asian in every sense of the word, viz., they are always Asian-Christian.---Hence, by paying careful attention to both tradition and praxis, as well as historicity and temporality, thereby communicating the reality of the Christian Gospel which enters, again and yet again, into human facticity and events within the Asian *Sitz-im-Leben* in every age and time, the FABC’s contextual theological methodology can truly be said to be authentically Asian Christian.” Tan 2003, 29-31.

<sup>222</sup> Much of the literature on religious pluralism is written by Western theologians (as, e.g., note x above shows). Felix Wilfred discusses the question about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as follows: “I do realize that the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is very important for present-day Western Christianity which is facing a crisis following the positive discovery of the reality of other religious traditions after centuries of negation of and isolation from them. I would like to use the analogy of knots to characterize the crisis situation. Questions such as the uniqueness of Christ are knots that have come to be as a result of centuries-long Christological interpretations in the West, and we understand the need to unknot them—if I may coin a new word. But for us to turn unknotting into our major task in the interpretation of Jesus would be to engage in something that has neither historical nor cultural precedents and implications in Asia. ... tendency and claim to present a single universal picture of Jesus has continued in the Western tradition, and could be seen as recent as in the writings of Hans Kung (1979:145ff). Underlying such attempts are, it seems to me, a positivist approach that claims neutrality and a scientific-type of “objectivity” in “Christology.” Wilfred 2006. (East Asian Pastoral Review, 2006, Volume 43, Number 4) <http://www.eapi.org.ph/resources/eapr/east-asian-pastoral-review-2006/volume-43-2006-number-4/jesus-interpretations-in-asia-fragmentary-reflections-on-fragments> (Accessed September 11, 2016)

Instead of attempting to present a single, universal picture which would be un-understandable and incompatible in Asia, Wilfred proposes an Asian approach which starts from fragments (“a response to Asian questions) and organically grows towards an integrated whole. Human beings begin to understand the mystery of love through concrete acts. Similarly, in discovering concrete facets of Jesus’ person, teaching and life, we begin the search for a fuller understanding of Jesus. Therefore, for Wilfred, it is imperative that we employ such categories and metaphors that resonate with our experience and reflect our cultures. Wilfred’s characterisation falls well within my approach as interpreting FABC’s contextual theology as a process or a pilgrimage during which understanding of truth accumulates

religions. The FABC upholds the supremacy of God's revelation in Christ. However, the thought of the Asian bishops does not constitute a fixed and coherent systematic theology of religions. That would probably be seen as too uncompromising and too "un-Asian". Rather, as the Asian pilgrim Church continues its journey in dialogue with other Asian faith traditions, it learns from them and contributes to them so that a fuller understanding and expression of truth can be achieved.

As has been noted repeatedly, the impetus to become Asian (Asianness) has been a perennial theme throughout the existence of the FABC. Thus, without subscribing in toto to the notion of Asian essentialism, the Asian Catholic bishops seem to represent "a common sense of Asianness [which] has been emerging over the last fifty years."<sup>223</sup> This Asianness avoids categorisations and exclusions that are often regarded as too uncompromising and also too Western. Asia wishes to be open to wisdom and truth that can be acquired from other religions and contextual realities.

In summarising the Asian bishops' thought regarding other religions, we can conclude that the FABC's position can validly be described as an "inclusive pluralistic" position. The Asian Churches discover their own Asian Catholic identity as they occupy a position which embraces pluralism of religions both *de facto* and *de iure*. The adherents of other religions are accepted as co-pilgrims who are on pilgrimage on the same way towards the Kingdom of God. Mutual dialogical enrichment among religions, in which the religions contribute to each another, helps the religions to comprehend the truth in a fuller way. The presence of the Word of God (*Logos spermatikos*), and the Spirit of God based on the Creation, is proof that "Asia" is inherently capable of embracing the Christian message. All these mentioned features fall within the concept of Asianness, which forms a repeatedly emerging theme in the FABC documents. However, in the end an inclusivist undertone remains: the FABC accepts and proclaims that in Jesus Christ God's filial relationship with human beings is best and most clearly visible.

The next section moves to examine another important Asian contextual reality, namely Asian cultures. What kinds of perspectives will open up as the FABC enters into dialogue with them?

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as the "Pilgrim" church continues its journey. <http://www.eapi.org.ph/resources/eapr/east-asian-pastoral-review-2006/volume-43-2006-number-4/jesus-interpretations-in-asia-fragmentary-reflections-on-fragments> (Accessed September 11, 2016)

Hwa Yung (1997, 102-121) argues that the concept of religious pluralism is not an inherently Asian concept. However, he does agree that there are inclusive elements in certain streams of Asian thought, but "both Chinese/Korean Confucianism and Indian Hinduism (and for that matter, Buddhism and Islam also) have clear canons by which orthodoxy is defined and heterodoxy excluded.---the fundamental inspiration behind promoting religious pluralism lies in "liberal Western thought, living under the Enlightenment." Yung 1997, 118.

<sup>223</sup>Amaladoss 2014, 104.

### 4.3. The FABC in Dialogue with Asian Cultures

#### 4.3.1. The FABC's Understanding of Asian Cultures

The concept of culture itself has been defined in countless ways.<sup>224</sup> Therefore, this subchapter will not touch upon those definitions more than what is necessary to ascertain how the FABC understands and describes culture. What definitions of culture appear in the FABC's text corpus? How do the Asian bishops see and assess their own Asian cultures? What kind of 'soil' are Asian cultures, what good do they contain on the one hand, and, on the other hand, what perhaps are their defects? After addressing these questions, I will also explore the theologically very crucial matter of inculturation. This question will shed light on the matter in which the FABC attempts to balance between the universality of the gospel while at the same time inculturating it; that is, makes it "Asian" and applicable to various Asian contexts and cultures.

How do the Asian bishops define the concept "culture"? One is provided by the Office for Theological Concerns: "In a sense, culture is a people's way of being human and inter-human. It embodies the values of the human person and the community, esteemed virtues such as hospitality, compassion, faithfulness, sense of the sacred, and society's institutions. It includes people's stories,

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<sup>224</sup> A classic in introducing different aspects of culture is Luzbetak's *The Church and Cultures* (10<sup>th</sup> printing in 2002) which aims to present culture in the framework of missiological anthropology and in face of current world conditions. The book introduces a wealth of scientific knowledge relevant to pastoral work, religious education social action and liturgy. It focuses especially on contextualization. On pages 156-172 Luzbetak provides, among other things, the following definitions of culture: "It is a set of norms for living and it consists of recipes, rules, introductions and guidelines on to live. It also sets standards for behaviour. Culture is indeed very much a kind of map or blueprint for living. It is a plan according to which a society is to adapt to its *physical, social, and ideational* environment." (Luzbetak 2002, 157. Emphasis in original). He also emphasises that cultures are unique. However, Luzbetak notes that there are common human traits; both human diversity and commonality have to be taken into account. Furthermore, culture is also a social inheritance and a tradition. Chupungco (s.a., 5) succinctly defines culture as consisting of human values, patterns and institutions. Wilfred (2005, 43-44) argues that all people have their "root paradigms", i.e. the underlying matrices, patterns of life and thought of a people. Root paradigms give birth to worldviews. Then, in turn, a philosophy and religion of a people spring forth from the root paradigms. Different civilisations around the world "have their own paradigms of thoughts reflected in the perception of the world, way of life, organisation of society, approach to life, mode of governance, resolution of conflicts, etc." Then, close to these root paradigms and worldviews are the fundamental values of a people which are nourished by religions and philosophies. These fundamental values explain the concrete choices a people make; the choices are based on what is seen central and what is peripheral in the life. Then Wilfred identifies the third element: the symbols and patterns which are interwoven into every aspect of life through celebration and rituals.

myths, the folk wisdom, etc.”<sup>225</sup> This explanation tells that in the OTC’s understanding culture covers all areas of human life; it is actually a way of being peculiar to human beings.

More elaboration on the understanding of culture is found in the following: Asian ancient cultures are still very much present in the today’s life in Asia. Culture consists of common values and aspirations that make up a common Asian identity. These values include “close family ties, smooth inter-personal relationships and religiosity”.<sup>226</sup> Further, one ingredient of Asian cultures is wholeness.<sup>227</sup> And more, cultures are gifts of God, and Christians should have a positive appreciation of their own cultures, however, without being blind to imperfections to the culture.<sup>228</sup> In the process of a genuine inculturation holy writings of Asian cultures should be studied.<sup>229</sup> Spiritually, Asian cultures have their own dynamism.<sup>230</sup> Asian religious cultures see reality holistically: human beings, society and the whole universe as intimately related and interdependent.<sup>231</sup> The soul of both persons and institutions of Asia is constituted by harmony.<sup>232</sup> Thus, Asian cultures are compatible with Asian worldview and mind-sets in a manner which was discussed above in chapter two.

Furthermore, a relevant Asian theological reflection will need to appreciate the treasures of Asian religions and cultures, in spite of a certain obscurity and distortion found in them.<sup>233</sup> In addition, Asian cultures “hold the contemplative dimension, renunciation, detachment, humility, simplicity and silence in the highest regard.”<sup>234</sup> Further, another Asian character of Asian cultures is that they are inspired by a vision of unity:

The universe is perceived as an organic whole with the web of relations knitting together each and every part of it. The nature and the human are not viewed as antagonistic to each other, but as chords in a universal symphony. ... This unity of reality is reflected in the human person in that his senses, consciousness and spirit are organically interlinked ... When this unity and harmony are manifested in inter-human relationships of justice, order and righteousness, it is considered *dharmic* (*dharma*,

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<sup>225</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2.1, FAPA 3, 357.

<sup>226</sup> Asian Colloquium 7, FAPA 1, 68.

<sup>227</sup> BIRA III 14, FAPA 1, 122.

<sup>228</sup> International Congress on Mission IV. 19, FAPA 1, 140. The defects and imperfections of Asian cultures in the view of the FABC will be addressed below.

<sup>229</sup> International Congress on Mission IV.19, FAPA 1, 140.

<sup>230</sup> International Congress on Mission II. g, FAPA 1, 143.

<sup>231</sup> FABC 4, 3.1.10, FAPA 1, 181.

<sup>232</sup> BIRA IV/1, 13 b, FAPA 1, 249. Along the same lines the OTC notes: “The Asian will use conceptual tools and a philosophical approach arising from the various Asian cultures. There are various Asian cultures and various philosophies, but there are certain general lines of approach that are typically Asian, certain values that are paramount in Asian cultures arising from the various philosophical traditions and the concrete social-religious-cultural situations in which Asians live. One of these values is harmony. “OTC Methodology, FAPA 3, 330.

<sup>233</sup> BIRA IV/, 15, FAPA 1, 261.

<sup>234</sup> FABC 5, 9.2.,FAPA 1, 288.

*dharmma*). Sensitivity in human relationships, close ties of love and cooperation in families are highly valued in our cultures.<sup>235</sup>

In its final statement the FABC's sixth Plenary Assembly (1995) describes Asian cultures in a rich way: there is "a vision of unity in diversity, a communion of life among diverse peoples."<sup>236</sup> This vision comprises a holistic life, a life with integrity and dignity, a life of compassion, especially for the poor and needy. It is also a life of solidarity with every form of life and of sensitive care for the earth. At the heart of this vision is the Asian reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred that discovers the Transcendent in all aspects of life.<sup>237</sup>

Further, many Asian cultures represent a cosmic worldview and have a holistic view of reality, in which human beings, society and the entire universe are intimately related and interdependent.<sup>238</sup>

The Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) describes Asian cultures as valuing family and family relationships. At the same time, however, in another plenary assembly (2000) the bishops acknowledge that there are cultural prejudices and traditions in Asian cultural practices: violence against women and girls in the family.<sup>239</sup>

When examining Asian Christian perspectives on harmony, the Theological Advisory Commission explicates their understanding of culture. Culture, the TAC notes, contains two basic aspects: an immanent, in-depth aspect and the external manifestations of the immanent aspects.<sup>240</sup> External manifestations of culture are rooted in the inner aspect, and they are manifested in mental and physical reactions and activities that shape human behaviour. These two aspects are linked together and are not static. The external aspect changes more rapidly than the inner level. This guarantees the

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<sup>235</sup> BIRA IV/11, 6, FAPA 1, 319. The word *dharma* means to hold together, integration, harmony and unity.

<sup>236</sup> FABC 6, 10, FAPA 2, 5.

<sup>237</sup> FABC 6, 10, FAPA 2, 5. Religion is very much present in the midst of people's lives in many Asian countries. For example in Thailand spirit houses and shrines can be found almost everywhere. People from all walks of life visit shrines looking for help in their different needs.

<sup>238</sup> TAC Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 4.3., FAPA 2, 278-279. Also here: "FABC VI recognized in the rich diversity of ancient Asian cultures and faiths "a vision of unity in diversity, a communion of life among diverse peoples." It is a vision of "holistic life... achieved and entrusted to every person and every community of persons, regardless of gender, creed or culture, class or color... the fruit of integral development, the authentic development of the whole person and of every person." TAC Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 4.4., FAPA 2, 279. And here yet another description of culture: "Asian religious cultures see human beings, society and the whole universe as related and interdependent. Fragmentation and division contradict this vision." FABC 4, 3.1.10, FAPA 1, 181.

<sup>239</sup> FABC 7, 2, FAPA 3, 10. Asian cultures and worldviews are also said to be "cosmic, Spirit-oriented, family and community-oriented." OTC Methodology 4.1.3, FAPA 3, 367. As the reference here shows, despite good cultural values and intentions, in practice many of them are distorted. It can perhaps be said that in the TAC's opinion, Asian cultures are good in principle, but that in reality, despite many beautiful aspects and elements in them, there are bad traditions and practices experienced. The FABC is, therefore, neither naïve nor blind to the imperfections in Asian cultures.

<sup>240</sup> TAC Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 3.1, FAPA 2, 255.

stability and continuity of a culture. Moreover, people normally take their own culture for granted and tend to measure everything by the standards of their culture or ethos.

According to the TAC, sensitivity to sacred belongs to the immanent aspect of culture and results in 'religious experience'. This is subjective, and if it is structured it results in a religion or a philosophy of life. Possible changes in either the external manifestations of culture or at its immanent level have repercussions on religions and philosophies of life.<sup>241</sup> "Moreover, since all the aspects of culture are interrelated, any change in religious experience, religions and views of life and the world have an effect on the total culture. ...At the very core of cultures lies a basic component that ensures ongoing cultural integrity and harmony."<sup>242</sup> According to the TAC, the inner dimension of culture is quite impervious to change. This explains, for example, the strong, conscious or unconscious, influence of Confucianism on the Far East, despite the presence of Western democratic ideas introduced into these countries.<sup>243</sup> If this impenetrable inner dimension of culture is true, it has significant repercussions on religious life and theology in Asia. Life and theology must become truly 'Asian'. This requirement makes creating Asian contextual theology both imperative and possible. Here, again, one can think about the overriding theme of harmony in the FABC's documents. It seems to be an unchangeable character of Asian cultures. Asian contextual theology has to be 'harmonious.' It cannot be bypassed or ignored if one wishes to create a meaningful contextual theology.

Thus, the FABC characterises the most important components of culture in Asian contexts as follows: it is based on relationships and wholeness. Further, reality is perceived holistically. In this perception human beings, societies and the entire universe are interdependent. This interdependence produces compassion, especially for the poor and needy. Further, as discussed above, in the FABC's view harmony was seen to be an important undergirding principle of Asian cultures. Another important element of an Asian worldview is a cosmic dimension. Finally, Asian cultures have an innate sense of sacred and Transcendence. These identified cultural elements have an

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<sup>241</sup> "However, one may define culture, it is safe to say that it contains two basic aspects: an immanent in-depth aspect and the external manifestations of this immanent aspect. The immanent aspect can be seen as the inner formation of the mind, a way of experiencing, thinking and feeling. The external manifestations of culture have their roots in this bedrock, manifesting it in mental and physical reactions and activities that shape human behaviour. There is an intimate link between the two aspects, one is not simply a layer on top of the other. Furthermore, neither is static. Both are subject to modification, partly resulting from the continual exchange between the two levels. However, changes in the immanent aspect take place at a much slower rate than on the external level, resulting in sense of stability and continuity which give the person a stable cultural identity." TAC Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 3.1., FAPA 3, 255-256.

<sup>242</sup> TAC Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 3.1.1., FAPA 2, 256-257.

<sup>243</sup> TAC Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 3.1.1.-3.1.2., FAPA 2, 256-257

important role as the FABC examines the relationship between the Christian faith and Asian cultures. In all these, the FABC is obviously seeking parameters for the “Asianness” of the Christian faith.

It seems to be clear that the Asian bishops’ verdict on Asian cultures is predominantly positive. The defects of cultures do not occupy much space in the FABC’s thought. What might be reasons for this reticence? Apparently, one obvious intention is to create as much space as possible for the gospel among Asian cultures and to show that the Christian message can be accommodated in Asia. Asia in all its “Asianness” is inherently capable of embracing the Christian gospel.

How do the bishops see the relationship among culture, theology, and faith? First, if unchangeable in-depth characteristics of the culture (as mentioned above) can be identified, we can assume that these unchangeable characteristics are essential for constructing a contextual theology. However, Christian dogma also has certain unchangeable features. In many instances the FABC accepts Scripture and Tradition as sources of theology. These guarantee the catholicity of the Church and its doctrine. But if universal and local principles clash, which one then has the upper hand? How to balance between the universal and particular, or local? The Office of Evangelization (OE) of the FABC proposes one solution: to introduce an understanding of dogmatic Christian faith which is not static but rather is a developing pattern in which praxis of dialogue and proclamation precede satisfactory theological answers. Through systematic reflection on praxis, the Church discovers what God is saying.<sup>244</sup> This approach receives further affirmation when the Office of Theological Concerns explicate their goals as they begin to articulate a theological methodology for an Asia theology of harmony: “The purpose of this paper is to try to clarify what is happening and to show how it is rather a continuation of the tradition of the Church, a living tradition which today in Asia experiences an encounter with other Asian religious traditions and Asian cultures.”<sup>245</sup>

In the above text the OTC presents the two important, basic parameters: the tradition of the Church and a living tradition experienced in Asian contextual realities. These two constitute a theological program for the OTC. The OTC also attempts to demonstrate how the two dimensions, vertical and horizontal,<sup>246</sup> or, the universal and local dimensions of the Christian faith interact together.

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<sup>244</sup> “Since doing the truth comes before formulation of doctrine, the Churches in Asia should not wait a satisfactory theological answer before going further in praxis of dialogue and proclamation. It is in this systematic reflection on sustained praxis that we discover what God is saying to the Churches.” OE Theological Consultation 53, FAPA 2, 205.

<sup>245</sup> OTC Methodology, FAPA 3, 330.

<sup>246</sup> See Tan’s discussion on this in the previous chapter, page 154, n. 221.



Thus, the passages above reflect the provisional character of the FABC's theology, which is an evolving process and which takes place in praxis and in dialogue with Asian contextual realities.

When discussing contextual realities as resources for theology, the OTC writes about Asian cultural resources that provide material for the process of creating an Asian contextual theology:

Under this category come the constellations of collective symbolic values, world-views that touch the totality of life, human relationships, community, people's relation to nature, and people's beliefs, customs, etc. In a sense, culture is a people's way of being human and inter-human. It embodies the values of the human person and the community, esteemed virtues such as hospitality, compassion, faithfulness, sense of the sacred, and society's institutions. It includes people's stories, myths, the folk wisdom, etc. ... Further, there is the moral wisdom embodied in the cultures, philosophies and religions of Asian peoples. This is also a resource of theology, since both knowing God's purposes, and obeying and responding to them, i.e., doing God's will, belong together. The moral dimension is constitutive of the wholeness of theology. In Asia morality is integrated into culture and religion. The moral law is ethic-theological.<sup>247</sup>

This important text shows that the OTC understands culture in a broad manner. In a word, "culture is a people's way of being human and inter-human": the totality of personal and collective human life. When introducing this broad material of human life as resources of theology, the OTC underscores that the whole gamut of human life is a potential source for theology. The outcome of the assessment of Asian cultures by the OTC and the FABC is predominantly positive. Thus, an Asian contextual theology ought to welcome all dimensions of Asian cultures, philosophies and religions, not only some of their external manifestations. An Asian contextual theology cannot be created by merely 'decorating' the unchangeable core of the Christian faith with a few outer forms of Asian cultures. Being Asian, or Asianness, must penetrate to the core of the faith.<sup>248</sup> These are

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<sup>247</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2.1, FAPA 3, 356-357.

<sup>248</sup> The question of inculturation of liturgy is a revealing example of this challenge. The Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC) speaks about the substantial unity of the Roman liturgy as follows: "Provisions shall also be made, when revising the liturgical books, for legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions, and peoples, especially in mission lands, provided that the substantial unity of the Roman rite is preserved; and this should be borne in mind when drawing up the rites and devising rubrics." (SC III, 38) The wording 'substantial unity of the Roman rite' has created much debate on the meaning of it. Chupungco (2010, 2-3) explains this: "After several decades of liturgical reform there are still contrasting opinions about what the council had really intended to achieve. I had the occasion to ask Fr. Cipriano Vagaggini, another mentor of mine and one framers of the Liturgy Constitution, what 'substantial unity of the Roman rite' meant. The phrase is obscure, yet crucial to inculturation. His answer was quite revealing: "I asked the same question when we were drafting the Constitution but no one in the commission had an answer." One area which has been debated extensively is the question about the translation of the Roman Missal. In 1969 the Holy See published the document *Comme le prévoit* (On The Translation Of Liturgical Texts For Celebrations With A Congregation) which supported the principle of dynamic equivalence in translation. This meant that the translators were instructed to recast the Latin sentences in vernacular languages, without attempting to bring across individual Latin words. However, *Comme le prévoit* is no longer a valid guideline for liturgical translation. It was replaced by *Liturgiam authenticam*, (LA), (On the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Publication of the Books of the Roman Liturgy) in 2001. This document instructs the translation process as follows: "While it is permissible to arrange the wording, the syntax and the style in such a way as to prepare a flowing vernacular text suitable to the rhythm of popular prayer, the original text, insofar as possible, must be translated

identified as impervious, in-depth aspects of culture, and the Christian faith and an Asian contextual theology have to reach deep down to these levels as well.

In order to show the close interrelatedness between culture and religion, the OTC analysis continues: "Religion is a depth dimension of culture."<sup>249</sup> As such religions touch the most important aspects of human life. Moreover, no culture is neutral with regard to religion, and vice versa. Of this definition one can ask about its applicability in a multi-cultural and multi-religious context. If the interests and interpretations of religions and cultures contradict each other, whose interpretation prevails? The documents do not problematize this question<sup>250</sup>. Maybe the purpose at this point is to characterise a general understanding of culture and the place of religions in it. This can perhaps explain the lack of possible points of contradiction in the inter-cultural encounter.

The FABC actually takes the content of the religion-relatedness of cultures even further when at a consultation on Evangelization and Inculturation arranged under the Office of Evangelization (OE)

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integrally and in the most exact manner, without omissions or additions in terms of their content, and without paraphrases or glosses. Any adaptation to the characteristics or the nature of the various vernacular languages is to be sober and discreet." LA II, 20. The 2011 translation of the New English Missal is an example of a liturgical translation produced according to the principles of LA.

Francis (2014, 239-254) discusses what the concept "Substantial unity of the Roman Rite" means in the context of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. He notes that the expression itself is nowhere defined in the conciliar constitution. Thus, the Council left it open for different interpretations. Francis (2014, 252) argues that "the original intention of the constitution was to give much more space for adapting the texts and rites to the genius of the many cultures where the Roman Rite is practiced." Francis regrets that the more recent development of the understanding of the "substantial unity" in the documents of the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has changed so that the Congregation seems to promote an ahistorical understanding of the Roman Rite, which, in Francis' opinion, is ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of the global church. In this view, the Vatican seems to assert that the Roman Rite is exempt from being understood as a cultural product and instead is "supra-regional" and supra-cultural and thus able to be understood by all cultures. Francis 2014, 253.

<sup>249</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 357. One more definition appears when the OTC notes another typical character of Asian cultures: they are 'shame cultures' rather than 'guilt cultures'. OTC, 2007, 9 (FABC Papers 120): "Sociological studies in some Asian countries have clearly shown that "rewarding" and "punishment" are still effective ways of Asian functioning in most of our countries, for the simple reason that most of our peoples are still shrouded with what is called "a shame culture" as against" a guilt culture".

The FABC does not develop this distinction between shame and guilt cultures further. One might expect it be more clearly represented as a distinctive character for the purposes of describing 'Asianness'. In my own experience of Thai culture, the concept of saving/losing one's face is an important matter and also has even soteriological connotations. Jesus' sufferings and death can perhaps be described in a contextually understandable manner in the framework of shame and losing face on behalf of others.

<sup>250</sup> Wilfred (2005, 45) discusses the possible risks and conflicts that can occur in an intercultural and interreligious encounter: "When a religion feels threatened, it tries to erect hedges and walls all around to protect itself. It positively sets aside meeting with another religion or philosophy. This insulation which can happen to any minority community, for fear of being overwhelmed by the majority, or in a majority community for fear of being dominated by a powerful minority, leads to fundamentalist tendencies. The contemporary experiences with fundamentalism in India amply demonstrate the truth of this statement."

the participants affirm that cultures belong to God's salvific plan for the world: "Culture, in the Divine Plan, has a significant role. At the same time culture can deviate from the Divine Plan. The phenomenon of intercultural<sup>251</sup>, that is, the awareness of the interaction and influence of cultures on each other draws attention to the enriching as well as dehumanizing factors that are operative in the values and meaning-systems of all cultures."<sup>252</sup>

The FABC further develops its cultural analysis by contrasting Asian cultures against western cultures, a subject discussed above. It was noted there that the FABC's verdict on the ways of how western cultural patterns were introduced in Asia were predominantly critical: "'The Church is an institution planted in Asia rather than an evangelizing community of Asia."<sup>253</sup> This criticism calls the Church to conversion so that it can fulfil its mission in Asia.<sup>254</sup> Further, the formulation of an Asian theology of harmony calls for rereading the Bible from an Asian perspective, as in many aspects the biblical revelation is kindred to Asian cultural patterns.

How, then, do the Asian bishops tackle the question of the differences between the East and the West and, consequently, also which exist between the universal and local dimensions of cultures? The bishops acknowledge that western, conceptual, rationalistic theology serves to safeguard the unity and objectivity of theology but as such it is inadequate for and incompatible with Asian cultural and religious contexts. When evaluating Asian cultures, the Asian bishops wish to be 'Asian'. Here again the thrust to define the church's position towards Asian cultures takes place through 'Asianness', being Asian: what, for example a holistic, harmonious world-view means for the Christian message and church. Or, how does a non-dualistic approach to immanence and transcendence in Asian religious cultures affect the ways in which the church ought to present itself in Asia? Faithful to their inductive and contextual approach, the FABC first identifies and describes its own contexts through a careful groundwork. After identifying Asian cultural contextual characteristics, the FABC then embraces them as material for theological reflection. However, it is clear to that the FABC's verdict of Asian cultural-contextual realities is predominantly positive.

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<sup>251</sup> This concept of intercultural will be discussed further below in this chapter.

<sup>252</sup> Consultation on Evangelization and Inculturation, FAPA 3, 218.

<sup>253</sup> OE Theological Consultation 13, FAPA 1, 337.

<sup>254</sup> OE Theological Consultation 16, FAPA 1, 338: "The Church is called to partake in the paschal mystery, and die to herself in order to be raised up with the Lord. The Church is in need of continual conversion and needs to "pass over" with Christ to the poor, to Asian cultures and to other religions." It is against this background that the 'clarion call' of FABC "If the Asian churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future." (Asian Colloquium, FAPA 1, 70) is to be understood.

Positive adjectives also appear when the sixth Plenary Assembly (1995) describes an Asian vision of life,

We Asians are searching not simply for the meaning of life but for life itself. We are striving and struggling for life because it is a task and a challenge ... We speak of life as a becoming ... In the rich diversity of ancient Asian cultures and faiths is a vision of unity in diversity, a communion of life among diverse peoples. In this context we seek to become persons of dialogue. ... Our vision is a holistic life. ... We envision a life with integrity and dignity, a life of compassion for the multitudes, especially for the poor and the needy. ... At the heart of our vision life is the Asian reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred, a spirituality that regards life as sacred and discovers the Transcendent and its gifts even in mundane affairs, in tragedy and victory, in brokenness and wholeness. This deep interiority draws people to experience harmony and inner peace and infuses ethics into all of creation.<sup>255</sup>

Hence, an Asian contextual theology requires of the Christian faith a certain amount of ‘stripping off western clothes’ and putting on ‘an Asian attire’. Nevertheless, after this approach the question still remains as to what the necessary, unchangeable core elements of the Catholic faith are that need an ‘Asian attire’. This challenge has not been an easy for the FABC to respond on. As a Catholic body, the FABC acknowledges the Scriptures and Tradition as inherited and authoritative sources of the faith. However, they also acknowledge that these sources are not culture-free. They were born in specific cultural situations and, as such, they are culturally conditioned. Therefore, western, inherited ways of interpreting and applying them need to be supplemented by Asian approaches.

Here one can perhaps identify paradigm analogous to the *gratia non tollit* axiom, in which grace fulfils and perfects nature. However, here the paradigm can also be understood as operating in reverse order: the Scripture and Tradition, which certainly contain ‘graced’ revelation, will be perfected and supplemented by the ‘goodness’ of Asian cultures, ways and methods of interpretation peculiar to Asia. This ‘Asianness’ not only awaits purification and fulfilment, but its contribution is also positive: ‘Nature’, created and existing Asian contextual realities, make Christian revelation more perfect, or at least make it more understandable and compatible in Asian contexts.

Does this supplementation also add something substantial to the Christian revelation, or does it pertain only to matters of external expressions of faith? If this supplementation adds something substantial, then the Asian bishops affirm that the Christian faith can be enriched and even

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<sup>255</sup> FABC 6, 9, FAPA 2, 5. In a similar manner: “Asian cultures see human beings, society and the whole universe are intimately related and interdependent. Fragmentation and division contradict this vision.” TAC, Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 4.3., FAPA 2, 279.

complemented by other cultures and other religions. Or, does this supplementation concern only the outer expressions of the Christian faith, so that the core of the gospel is something transcultural and supracultural? This very question addresses the hugely important issue in contextual theology; one's answer to that question will reveal much about how a specific type of theology sees the relationship between the universality versus the locality of the Christian faith. In many instances the FABC describes creating an Asian contextual theology and an Asian-applicable church-life as a process. As was noted above, this is Asian theology in the making. The FABC also views this process through the paradigm of incarnation, death and resurrection. In this process, both deculturation and liberation from foreign elements and putting on genuine Asian cultural forms are deemed as necessary but painful and complex processes of the cross and resurrection of inculturation.<sup>256</sup> The Office of Evangelization calls this process "conversion in which the Church passes over ('Passover') with Christ to the poor", to Asian cultures and to other religions.<sup>257</sup> This view suggests that an emerging contextual theology compatible with Asia is something 'new' which will be born out of a process in which the Christian faith and tradition are in dialogue with Asian contextual realities. In this process, a paradigm of death and resurrection is operative. The "new" arises substantially from the "old", but the outer form and appearance are new, particular to and compatible with Asia. The paradigm of death and resurrection also implies that the process will sometimes be painful and full of uncertainties: "Asian theology is a new enterprise marked by a certain experimental character, a certain ambiguity, uncertainty and tenuousness. It is not yet a finished product, given the dynamic nature of the theological enterprise envisioned. It is rather a pilgrimage."<sup>258</sup>

Eventually a 1991 meeting organised by the Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA) offered its response to the question how to create an Asian theology applicable to Asian cultures. It had become evident that contextual theology could not merely be contextual and local, but it had to stay in balance with the universal character of the Christian faith and teaching. This process of inculturation also brings about transformation of the Church: "A Church that stands with sisters and

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<sup>256</sup> "We may need a direct inculturation, or a genuine encounter between the gospel values and our cultures where we propagate not the cultural forms but only the essential elements of Christian ministry. Or we may for the most part need a corrective inculturation, or a simultaneous process of deculturation and inculturation – liberating ourselves prudently and gradually from acquired forms and taking in the genuine cultural forms of our lands. This necessary but painful and complex process is the cross and resurrection of inculturation." International Congress on Mission 8. a. FAPA 1, 150-151.

<sup>257</sup> OE, Theological Consultation 16, FAPA 1, 338.

<sup>258</sup> OTC, Methodology, FAPA 3, 331.

brothers of other faiths in confronting issues of life and death will necessarily be transformed in the process. In other words, it will be inculturated – at a level which includes but goes deeper than changes in ritual and symbol. Such a Church may at last become a Church of Asia not simply a Church in Asia. It may then be perceived as no longer an alien presence.”<sup>259</sup>

Thus, the FABC’s goal is to make the Asian Church discover its identity in a process which leads in change and transformation. Then, the Church becomes what it should be: the Church of Asia rather than merely the Church in Asia.

After our analysis of the FABC’s understanding of Asian cultures, it has become evident that the Asian Catholic bishops assess the cultures of their own continent as being predominantly good, and capable of embracing the Christian gospel. In addition, in their complementary and harmonious structures Asian cultures can even contribute to a better and more “Asian” understanding of the Gospel. The presence of the Word of God at least in the shape of “seeds of the Word” (*logoi spermatikoi*, based on Creation), and the presence of the Spirit outside of the boundaries of the church, testify to the inherent goodness of the contextual realities of Asia. Thus, with regard to Asian cultures, the Asian Catholic bishops seem in their positive assessment of Asian cultures to represent a certain kind of Asian cultural essentialism which does not leave much room for critical assessment of Asian cultures. The FABC’s long-lasting thrust for Asian Churches to discover their own identity and to become truly Asian in all things seems to lead to a conclusion in which Asian cultural milieus constitute helpful frameworks for the Asian bishops’ effort.

However, one important theme regarding the relationship between the gospel and cultures remains. That is the specific theme of inculturation which can be taken as a method of presenting the gospel in Asia, but also as a basic theological paradigm which perhaps cannot be simply reduced to a method.

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<sup>259</sup> BIRA IV/12, 52, FAPA 1, 333.

#### 4.3.2. Inculturating the Christian Gospel in Asia

First, it is important to examine how the FABC defines the term “inculturation”.<sup>260</sup> The concept itself appears hundreds of times in the Federation documents.<sup>261</sup> It also has been a topic for several doctoral dissertations on the FABC’s theology.<sup>262</sup> These facts indicate the importance of this particular theme. The Theological Advisory Commission provides the following definition: “The Asian bishops have understood evangelisation as the building up the local church through a threefold dialogue with the cultures, the religions and the poor of Asia. Inculturation, interreligious dialogue and liberation are the three dimensions of evangelisation.”<sup>263</sup> This and the following definitions come from the early years (1974-1978) of the FABC: Inculturation “renders the local church truly present within the life of our people.”<sup>264</sup> This means that without inculturation the church and gospel cannot be truly and meaningfully present in various contexts. Inculturation also assumes “into full Christian life of our peoples what is good, noble and living in our cultures and traditions.”<sup>265</sup> Further, already in the early years of the FABC, indigenization and inculturation were understood to be at the very root of the Asian churches’ coming into their own.<sup>266</sup> Among the numerous definitions appearing in the FABC documents, the following is worth quoting as well: “Inculturation is not mere adaptation of a ready-made Christianity into a given situation but rather a

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<sup>260</sup> The general development of this theological term was outlined in the Introduction chapter of the present study.

<sup>261</sup> For a robust introduction to the usage of term and topic “inculturation” in the theology of the FABC from 1970-1995, see Bevans 1997, 20-36. He writes: “The term ‘inculturation’ may not be the best description of the process by which the variety of Asian religious, cultural and economic contexts are taken seriously in the theological enterprise, nevertheless the search for ways to make the church more truly Catholic by making it more truly Asian functions as the leitmotif of every concern.” Bevans 1997, 21. He observes that explicit treatment of inculturation in the FABC documents 1970-1995 is quite sparse. A possible reason for this lack “is due to the fact that, for the Federation, the reality of inculturation is a more complex reality, made up of religions, cultures, poverty and the poor.” Bevans 1997, 25. He concludes that the most important theological assumption regarding inculturation is the universality of grace: “God’s presence has always permeated Asian realities.” Bevans 1997, 28.

<sup>262</sup> The term “inculturation” appears in the titles of the following doctoral dissertations on the FABC’s theology: Nemet L., *Inculturation in the Philippines: A theological study on the question of inculturation in the documents of CBCP and selected Filipino theologians in the light of Vatican II and the documents of FABC* (1994); Nguyen Van Am, *The Laity in Asia: Mission as Inculturation in the documents of FABC* (2001); Rukiyanto, *A new way of being church: a study of inculturation in the church of Asia and the church of Indonesia. A Roman Catholic perspective* (2007); Tran Ngoc Dang, *Inculturation in Missionary Formation according to the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences documents (1970-2006) with Special Reference to the Mission in Vietnam* (2009). Full bibliographical details of these dissertations were provided in the Introduction chapter. Also most of the remaining written doctoral dissertation on the FABC’s theology include discussion about inculturation in their studies. Kroeger (2010) has written a solid paper on some key issues that concern the Church in Asia under the title *Dialogue: the Interpretive Key for the Life of Church in Asia*. The theme of inculturation is a main theme of the document. The document also provides a good bibliography on inculturation. (<http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/FABC%20paper%20130.pdf>)

<sup>263</sup> Theses on Interreligious Dialogue, art. 6.4 ([http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc\\_paper\\_48.pdf](http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc_paper_48.pdf))

<sup>264</sup> FABC 1, III, 20, FAPA 1, 23.

<sup>265</sup> FABC 2, 22, FAPA 1, 31.

<sup>266</sup> Asian Colloquium 26, FAPA 1, 72.

creative embodiment of the Word in the local church.”<sup>267</sup> Finally, the following definition, produced in a 1983 consultation arranged by the FABC Offices of Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs and that of Evangelization, captures the vision of the Federation in a succinct manner: “It [inculturation] lies at the very core of Christian incarnational faith, life and witness. It is the existential way a Christian lives and witnesses to his faith in the concrete religious, social and cultural milieu in which providence places him.”<sup>268</sup> All these documents indicate that the topic of inculturation has been on the agenda of various plenary assemblies, offices and consultations. This presence of the topic of inculturation in the meetings shows the importance of the matter.

Later expositions of the concept of inculturation (1999, 2002) complement the picture of the FABC’s understanding of the theme of inculturation: a year 2000 Consultation on Evangelization and Inculturation states that inculturation is essential for the Church’s mission.<sup>269</sup> The process of inculturation should in turn result in “an inculturated Christian community, [which] fully integrated in the life of the local community will give rise to a new way of being Church in Asia.”<sup>270</sup> Further, the definition provided by the Office of Evangelization (OE), depicts the matter in a slightly more nuanced manner:

Inculturation is a journey of complementarity and harmony, where faith and its cultural expressions remain truly Christian while becoming truly Asian. It is in fact for us a matter of rediscovering and re-identifying with the “Asian roots of Christianity” (EA 4). When we do this we also realize that a mutual exchange of gifts, a cross-cultural sharing between faith and culture takes place. The integration of the two provides a new dimension to the Church’s catholicity or universality.<sup>271</sup>

In summarising the FABC’s definitions of the term “inculturation”, it can be seen that the following aspects appear: inculturation is inherently linked to building up a truly local church, which presupposes receiving that which is “good, noble and living” from cultures and traditions. Thus, inculturation has a dialogical dimension. Inculturation is also rooted in the incarnation of Christ, which is the principal model of inculturation. In addition, inculturation takes place through embodiment of the Word in the local Church. The FABC also holds that a church cannot live

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<sup>267</sup> International Congress on Mission 6, FAPA 1, 138.

<sup>268</sup> Consultation on Christian Presence Among Muslims in Asia 31, BIRA IV/1, 12a, FAPA 1, 170. Further characterisations of inculturation: dialogue is a necessary condition and instrument for inculturation (FAPA 1, 249); liturgical inculturation is necessary (BIRA IV/1, 15a, FAPA 1, 249); episcopal conferences must foster the inculturation of the sacraments and liturgy, especially the celebration of the Eucharist (FABC 5, 7.3.3.3., FAPA 1, 287);

<sup>269</sup> “Reviewing the life of the Church in Asia since Vatican II, we find that the Churches in Asia recognise the indispensable necessity of inculturation as a path of mission.” Consultation on Evangelization and Inculturation, FABC 3, 217

<sup>270</sup> Consultation on Evangelization and Inculturation, FAPA 3, 218.

<sup>271</sup> Symposium on Evangelization 10, FAPA 4, 252.



without inculturation; a church becomes ‘alive’ in specific, concrete, religious, social and cultural milieus. The final text quoted above adds yet other Asian dimensions to complement the picture: inculturation is defined as a journey of complementarity and harmony. This journey seeks to preserve the truly Catholic nature of the gospel and the church while becoming truly Asian in all things. However, in the opinion of the FABC inculturation in Asia presupposes a predominately Asian approach whereby the entire process is characterised by Asian-constitutive elements of which the FABC here lists harmony and complementarity. The chosen terms and methodology indicate the FABC’s inductive theological approach in which “Asia” and “Asianness” direct the theological process. However, these parameters clearly do not provide a precise map or guidelines for the actual process of inculturation but rather delineate a general framework within which the Christian message must fit. The process, described as “mutual exchange of gifts”, is presented in a positive way which leaves room for critical questions about the possibility of distortion in either side of the process.

The above cited document of Symposium on Evangelization also builds on Pope John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA), in which the late pope speaks about remembering the Asian roots of Christianity.<sup>272</sup> The pope clearly refers to the historical roots of the first Christian community in Asia, whereas the FABC appears to identify “Asian roots” more with the basic thrust of the Federation: an Asian Church which is truly Christian and truly Asian. Such a Church can come about only via inculturation, which is a process guided by complementarity and harmony. Here again the basic paradigm of the FABC emerges: dialogical encounter between the Christian gospel and Asian contexts renders the Asian church truly present, a process which can only take place through the journey of inculturation. Therefore, it seems that the Asian bishops interpret the expression “Asian roots of Christianity” in a somewhat different way from that of the pope. The FABC’s Asia, to some extent, seems to serve the end (perhaps even a bit idealistic) of inculturation. Successful inculturation is, therefore, a process to become “truly Asian”. Asianness as a hallmark of the theological project of the FABC also comes to the fore in the process of inculturation.

In order to get a more complete picture of the FABC’s theology of inculturation, the following passage is important: “The Word of God, which became flesh in Jesus Christ, continues to incarnate

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<sup>272</sup> “Through this Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, I wish to share with the Church in Asia and throughout the world the fruits of the Special Assembly. This document seeks to convey the wealth of that great spiritual event of communion and episcopal collegiality. The Synod was a celebratory remembering of the Asian roots of Christianity. The Synod Fathers remembered the first Christian community, the early Church, Jesus’ little flock on this immense continent (cf. Lk 12:32). They remembered what the Church has received and heard from the beginning (cf. Rev 3:3), and, having remembered, they celebrated God’s “abundant goodness” (Ps 145:7) which never fails. EA 4. The process of creating of *Ecclesia in Asia* was discussed above on page 45.

itself in the cultures of the peoples it encounters, transforming them in the power of the Spirit and leading them to the universal fullness of the new creation.”<sup>273</sup> The concept of *incarnatio continua* stresses that, here again, the important point of emphasis is that the process is ongoing. This approach is further emphasised when the FABC theologians wrote: “The mystery of the incarnation and the paschal mystery are at once the foundation and the model for the deep insertion of local Churches in the surrounding cultures in all aspects of their life, celebration, witness and mission.”<sup>274</sup> Noteworthy here are the words ‘foundation’ and ‘model’. Foundation expresses the theological basis of the incarnation/inculturation process. The theology and life of the Church must be founded on the historical facts of salvation history. But these two facts also constitute the paradigm and the model for the church of how the church teaches, lives and witnesses in Asia.

In addition, here in the context of inculturation we encounter the term “seminal reasons”, (a term which was already discussed above):

We must now start collecting again the “seminal reasons” (*logoi spermatikoi*) in modern man’s old and new religions and integrate them into a new synthesis of the Gospel as it is experienced by today’s man. This will lead to a new era of theological reflection, liturgical creativity and new forms of religious life – a new era that will make the Catholic Church for the first time really “Catholic” by introducing into her the riches of all nations, as the riches of some have been introduced in the past. No doubt this will not take place without hesitation and danger, insecurity and uncertainty.<sup>275</sup>

This is an important text; something new is emerging through the process this passage describes. The text even calls this process “a new era” which will make the Catholic Church really “Catholic”. This implies that until now certain elements of being “truly Catholic” have been lacking. The church needs the riches of all nations to become genuinely Catholic. Again, the paradigm of mutual enrichment is evident here. The “seminal reasons”, based on creation, will make this mutual enrichment possible. This text mainly associates “seminal reasons” with religions, but “the riches of all nations” certainly also implies Asian cultures, from which the Asian Catholic Church receives good and enriching elements produced by the ‘*logoi spermatikoi*’. Here the bishops also give an important definition of the hoped-for end result: a new synthesis through integration and

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<sup>273</sup> International Congress on Mission I.1, FAPA 1, 138. The continuing incarnation (*incarnatio continua*) of the Word of God effects this transformation. Incarnation is, of course, a perennial theological theme and foundation for contextual theologies. In the FABC’s theology, the theme appears to occupy an important hermeneutic key for understanding how Asian bishops see the relationship between the Christian message and Asian cultures and peoples. The Logos is present not merely on account of creation, as planted seeds, but also more ‘fully’. The Logos is really present through the Church’s life and proclamation. The text cited above seems to indicate the notion of the fulfilment-paradigm: The Logos becomes present through continuous incarnation and effects transformation, which leads to fullness.

<sup>274</sup> OE, Conclusions of the Theological Consultations 35, FAPA 2, 201.

<sup>275</sup> Asian Colloquium 19, FAPA 1, 71.

dialogue<sup>276</sup>. What is born is something in which both agents provide something substantial. For the church, the reason for embracing Asian religions and cultures as material for synthesis is the presence of the '*logoi spermatikoi*' in Asian cultures.

Another important passage reads: "Inculturation is a discovery of the seeds of the Word which lie hidden in the given cultures and living traditions (cf. AG, 11). The mutual exchange of their discoveries among the local churches will lead to their enrichment as well as that of the universal Church."<sup>277</sup> This text also indicates a process in which the seeds of the Word sown in the creation bring about enrichment in churches.

Thus, the Word of God is operative in the process of inculturation where "a people receives the Word, makes it the principle of their life, values, attitudes and aspirations."<sup>278</sup>

Furthermore, the bishops note that "The seed of the Word has fallen into the rich soil of Asia. It penetrates that soil and produces fruits that may be different from the results of other branches."<sup>279</sup> It is noteworthy to see in this quote that it is taken from the introduction paragraph to the 'Methodology: Asian Christian Theology'- document written by the OTC. It is therefore safe to assume that the OTC develops their Asian contextual theology using the notions of 'seed' and 'soil' as the basis for their theological enterprise. Expressions in this and the previous quoted text imply the idea of organic growth which can only take place through dialogue with Asian contextual realities.

Yet another argument for the significance of the term 'seed of the Word' can be found when the fifth Plenary Assembly (1990) describes God's universal plan of salvation for the whole world:

A renewal of our sense of mission means, first of all, renewal of our faith that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to be the savior of all. This Son, through whom all things were made (Jn 1:3, Heb. 1:2) became like us in all things, sin alone excepted (Heb. 4:15).[---] (Jn 1:9). He has imprinted traces

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<sup>276</sup> Although dialogue is not mentioned here, its importance as a primary method in encountering other religions and cultures is repeatedly affirmed elsewhere.

<sup>277</sup> International Congress on Mission III., 8, FAPA 1, 139. Here appears a reference to *Ad gentes* 11, which speaks of the seeds of the Word which lay hidden among national and religious traditions.

<sup>278</sup> International Congress on Mission, I. 2, FAPA 1, 138. The message of a colloquium organised by the Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy (OESC) of the FABC writes: "God speaks to people through their cultures and sows the "seeds of His Word (AD GENTES, 11) in every human culture, because God wants all people to be saved. For this reason, Christians should be in dialogue with their own cultures in order to discover the seeds of the Divine Message planted there which take root, grow and bear fruit. By coming into dialogue with the cultures of others, Christians are challenged to expand their horizons...learn to respect others and ways of living different from their own. .... They can come to a deeper understanding of their own faith through a dialogue with the religions and cultures in which they live." OESC 3, FAPA 2, 22.

<sup>279</sup> OTC Methodology, FAPA 3, 330

of his revelation in the world which exists in him (Col. 1:16), and in the “seeds of the Word” found in cultures and other religious traditions.<sup>280</sup>

The presence of the seeds of the Word has a bearing on the Church’s mission in the world. Following the model of incarnation, “mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God’s Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word. Mission will mean a dialogue with Asia’s poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions.”<sup>281</sup>

But the question remains: what are the principles and conditions for interpreting the Word when inculturating the Word in a new situation? If the Word needs to be “freed from its historical limited embodiments”<sup>282</sup>, who or what then guarantees the correct interpretation of the Word in new situations? Moreover, what are these ‘historical limited embodiments’ that the Church needs to be freed from? The FABC does provide examples of such embodiment. However, if we take into account other examples in which the Federation criticises especially western, ‘imported’, ‘transplanted’, and as such incompatible ways of interpreting the Christian message in Asia, it should be safe to assume that this example refers to these aforementioned examples. At the same time, however, it is self-evident that the Asian bishops do not envisage ‘a free church’ which would lose sight of the importance of belonging to the Catholic Church. What, then, guarantees and preserves the link between the Church universal and local, and what guarantees the correct interpretation of the Word in Asian contexts?

The FABC’s answer to these questions is that a local Church is the principal author of the inculturation process. However, the local Church is not merely the local Church. In the words of the first Plenary Assembly (1974): “The local Church is one with the universal Church, one with the See of Peter, blessed by the same Holy Spirit, sharing in the same sacramental life, living in the same Body of Christ, believing in one God, one faith, one baptism – but it is a church incarnate in the people.”<sup>283</sup> The oneness between a local Church and the universal Church is constituted by the

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<sup>280</sup> FABC 5, 3.1.1., FAPA 1, 279. Quatra (2000, 90) correctly notes: “This text [FABC 5, 3.1.1., FAPA 1, 279] leads to the full understanding of the FABC view of the seeds of the Word, which are not presented in a reductive manner as if they were nothing more than “fragments of truth”. The seeds of the Word in religions and cultures are an expression of the Word’s very presence and activity in them. This Word, in turn, is none other than Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life of the Asian peoples.”

<sup>281</sup> FABC 5, 3.1.2, FAPA 1, 280.

<sup>282</sup> “The Word, discovered anew in and freed from its limited historical embodiments, becomes relevant to the life of the community here and now, giving a new orientation and a fresh challenge and dynamism in meeting its life problems.” International Congress on Mission I. 3, FAPA 1, 138.

<sup>283</sup> FABC 1, 9, FAPA 1, 22.

ministry of the pope, sharing the same Spirit, faith and sacramental life of the church. A 1977 document produced by the Asian Colloquium further elaborates upon the notion of a local Church, following the teaching of Vatican II. It emphasises the office of the bishop “by whose ministry of unity and presidency the diocesan community is linked in space with all other Churches and in time with the Church of the apostles.”<sup>284</sup>

Thus, by using the terms ‘same’, ‘shared faith’ and ‘ecclesial structures’, the bishops firmly establish a strong connection and oneness between a local Church and the universal Church. These terms set out a framework for the process of inculturation of the Christian faith in local contexts. In the FABC’s view, the local Church is the primary agent of the inculturation process. Consequently, the local Church will also need to be inculturated, and this process is described as a creative embodiment of the Word and a dialogical process through which hidden seeds of the Word in cultures and traditions are discovered.<sup>285</sup> This process of inculturation can also be a rather painful process: “As the Incarnation of the Son has been fulfilled in the Paschal Mystery, the inculturation process also involves an experience of death and resurrection. The Church as the messenger of the Gospel on the one hand, the given cultures and traditions of the people on the other, *both* must be purified, healed and transformed by the saving power of the Gospel.”<sup>286</sup>

This passage picks up an important aspect of purification, which seems to provide an important key for understanding the FABC’s inculturation theology: both the church and cultures must be purified by the power of the gospel. Purification does not solely concern “cultures and traditions of the

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<sup>284</sup> Asian Colloquium 38, FAPA 1, 75. “The reality of the Church becomes actualized in diverse ways at various levels; this is the mystery of the “local church” in its many forms. Among these, Vatican II has signalled out the “*the particular church*” or *diocesan community* as having special ecclesial significance. This special significance is due to the presence in its midst of the bishop, by whose ministry of unity and presidency the diocesan community is linked in space with all other Churches and in time with the Church of the apostles. According to Vatican II the constitutive elements of the particular Church of the diocese are a community of believers, the Holy Spirit in whom they are gathered, and the bishop who, as “visible principle and foundation of unity” (LG23) exercises among them his teaching, sacramental and pastoral ministry (CD 11; LG 26).” Asian Colloquium 38, FAPA 1, 75 (emphasis in original).

<sup>285</sup> International Congress on Mission 7-8, FAPA 1, 138-139.

<sup>286</sup> International Congress on Mission 7, FAPA 1, 9. FAPA 1, 139. (Emphasis in original) Here appears a reference to *Evangelii nuntiandi* (EN) 15, which speaks about the Church as an evangelizer herself in need of constant evangelization, conversion and renewal. The concepts of purification and healing addressed to the Church are found in the vocabulary of the FABC. Here one can detect a possible difference of emphasis between the Vatican and Asian bishops. The previous Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Adolfo Nicolás, pays attention to the position of the Church in Asia: “No wonder then that the crisis of Christianity affects mostly the *Church* itself. The Church has to recuperate its humble position in the plan of salvation. Like all human mediations, it is subjected to the law of growth and decay, of sin and grace, of death and resurrection. To pretend otherwise is self-deception and a denial of the Cross and the status of servant that Jesus took for himself and for all those, people as well as institutions, who want to follow him to the end. The Church in Asia has been poor often, persecuted in many places and for long periods of time, powerless and almost invisible in not a few places...” Nicolás 2005, 69. It is noteworthy that before his election as the Superior General of the Jesuits, Nicolás lived many decades in Asia, primarily in Japan.

people”, but also the Church. Here this purification is likened to the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. It involves both death and resurrection. The total mystery of Jesus Christ is the foundational principle and central criterion of God’s presence in the world: in peoples, in religions, cultures and their histories. The Church needs to grasp this mystery of God’s presence more deeply in order to be able to discern the resources of the third *locus theologicus*, Asian contextual realities: the scriptures of other religions and their cultures and histories.<sup>287</sup>

This abovementioned paradigm of the Paschal Mystery addresses Asian cultures from the totality of the mystery of Jesus Christ, not merely through the incarnation model.<sup>288</sup> At this point one can ask: can a culture also ‘die and rise again’ when it is met by the Risen Christ? The Church’s proclamation of the Risen Christ as the Lord of the whole universe inevitably challenges all human cultures: “As the Incarnation of the Son has been fulfilled in the Paschal Mystery, the inculturation process also involves an experience of death and resurrection.”<sup>289</sup> A successful inculturation can only happen when the Church, together with cultures, follows the paradigm of Christ and in his

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<sup>287</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2.4.4., FAPA 3, 361-362: “For Christian theology, the foundational principle and central criterion of God’s presence and action in the world, in peoples, in religions, in cultures and their history, is the total mystery of Jesus Christ - incarnation, ministry, passion, death and resurrection, ascension and the Gift of the Spirit (Pentecost), as presented in the New Testament. A deeper and all-embracing grasp of this mystery will be decisive in discerning all the resources of theology: scriptures of other religions, culture, the history of people’s suffering and struggles. The same mystery brings an openness to God’s liberating truth and saving grace, which is manifested as action of the Spirit in other religions and peoples. It further deepens and expands our own theological resources.”

<sup>288</sup> This FABC’s paradigm resembles the thought of Aylward Shorter (1999, 79-83), who analyses the contemporary discussion of the logic of incarnation as stated in the Second Vatican Council. According to Shorter, taking incarnation as a starting point for an understanding inculturation was one of the Council’s most creative insights. The analogy of the incarnation serves a “Christology from above”: the Son of God took flesh and adopted a human culture as a necessary concomitant of his human nature. Further, the incarnation analogy indicates Christ’s need of cultures in order to share the Good News. The incarnation analogy is then applied to the church as it continues Christ’s mission. When appraising the usage of the term incarnation in the current discussion, Shorter also finds certain defects or inadequacies in it. For example, according to Shorter, the understanding of inculturation as an ongoing dialogue between Gospel and cultures is overlooked. He suggests that the notion of incarnation should be enlarged to include the entire Christian mystery: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Linking inculturation solely to the actual incarnation produces a one-way view of an inculturation: A Christology from above where continuous incarnation through processes of history and human communication could be lacking. Finally, in Shorter’s analysis, when concentrating on how Jesus identified himself with a specific culture, we could forget to ask how he challenged his own culture. Shorter recommends that “a more inclusive approach is taken to the mystery of the Word made flesh. ... One cannot use only one aspect of the Christ-event to illuminate the dialogue between Gospel and culture. The whole mystery of Christ, passion, death and resurrection, has to be applied analogically to the process of inculturation. It is only when this is done that a Christological understanding of inculturation becomes possible. The emphasis must be shifted from Incarnation to Paschal Mystery.” Shorter 1999, 82-83.

<sup>289</sup> International Congress on Mission,9, FAPA 1, 139. “The mystery of the incarnation and the paschal mystery are at once the foundation and the model for the deep insertion of local [inculturated] Churches in the surrounding cultures...” Conclusions of the Theological Consultation 35, FAPA 2, 201. In this connection Aylward Shorter also pays attention to the fact how Jesus himself challenged his own culture. “It is not enough to look for concordance between Christ and culture. His challenge as a ‘stranger’ must also be considered.” Shorter 1999, 82. Of course, the Paschal mystery concerns also salvation of human beings and even more, the whole human history: “Our faith teaches us that ultimately the city of man and all of human history can be saved only by the Passion and the Rising again of Christ entering into our lives.” FABC 2, 44, FAPA 1, 37.

footsteps so that they are ready to ‘die and rise again’. Something will be taken away in this process, and the new can only be born through this process. The bishops repeatedly say that this “new” is born in a pilgrimage process, according to the foundation and model of Christ. This aspect of the Paschal Mystery is a very remarkable framework and paradigm for the Asian bishops as they venture on their journey toward creating an Asian-compatible theology. To put it in a simple mathematical equation employed by Anscar Chupungco: when the gospel (A) meets a culture (B), the result of A+B is not AB but rather C. Something new is born out of the encounter, but the new essentially grows out of both A and B.<sup>290</sup> This “new” is perhaps an emerging *tertium quid*<sup>291</sup> that the FABC seeks to develop as an answer to the question of how an Asian-compatible theology can remain faithful to the genuine Catholic tradition and at the same time be relevant and capable of bringing the gospel alive in various Asian contexts.

However, the Asian bishops have more to say about the purification required of both the Church and cultures. The above-quoted text refers to Pope Paul VI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), in which the pope writes about how the Church is in need of evangelisation by constant conversion and renewal.<sup>292</sup> This text seems to mean that the source for renewal and conversion is the gospel: the Church needs to go back to its own source of life. The FABC document does not contradict EN, but adds the notions of purification, healing, and transformation as actions needed by both the church and cultures. The terms “purification”, “healing” and “transformation”, in standard Catholic parlance, are addressed to those entities which need the help of supernatural grace: in this specific case, the cultures and traditions. Thus, in this paradigm cultures and traditions serve as preparation for the gospel, waiting for the fulfilment effected by the gospel. The FABC’s interpretation here seems to regard other cultures and religions in a much more positive way than they are regarded in the fulfilment model. Other cultures and religions are all

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<sup>290</sup> This is how Chupungco describes the difference between acculturation and inculturation: “The difference between acculturation and inculturation may be illustrated with the formula A+B=C. Unlike the formula A+B=AB [acculturation], this formula implies that the contact between A and B confers mutual enrichment on the interacting partners, so that A is no longer simply A but C, and likewise B is no longer simply B but C. However, because of the dynamic of transculturation, A does not become B, nor does B become A. Both undergo internal transformation, but in the process do not lose their identity.” Chupungco 1992, 29-30.

<sup>291</sup> See my earlier discussion on this on page 76.

<sup>292</sup> “The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself. She is the community of believers, the community of hope lived and communicated, the community of brotherly love, and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love. She is the People of God immersed in the world, and often tempted by idols, and she always needs to hear the proclamation of the “mighty works of God” which converted her to the Lord; she always needs to be called together afresh by Him and reunited. In brief, this means that she has a constant need of being evangelized, if she wishes to retain freshness, vigor and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel. The Second Vatican Council recalled and the 1974 Synod vigorously took up again this theme of the Church which is evangelized by constant conversion and renewal, in order to evangelize the world with credibility.” EN 15.

participants in a reciprocal, dialogical process in which the seeds of the Word are discovered and through which the Christian message becomes genuinely inculturated. The end result will be enrichment on both sides, in the Church and in cultures and traditions. The FABC's more positive stand concerning other religions in comparison to *Evangelii Nuntiandi* becomes even clearer when we read the following passage of EN:

Even in the face of natural religious expressions most worthy of esteem, the Church finds support in the fact that the religion of Jesus, which she proclaims through evangelization, objectively places man in relation with the plan of God, with His living presence and with His action; she thus causes an encounter with the mystery of divine paternity that bends over towards humanity. *In other words, our religion effectively establishes with God an authentic and living relationship which the other religions do not succeed in doing, even though they have, as it were, their arms stretched out towards heaven.*<sup>293</sup>

The Pope contends that other religions cannot establish an authentic and living relationship with God. Here the Pope seems to uphold the standard fulfilment paradigm in its classical form. The difference with the position of the Asian bishops stands out clearly.

Another example of different opinions between the FABC and the Curial authorities appears in the 1988 document entitled *Faith and Inculturation* published by the International Theological Commission (ITC) of the Vatican. One chapter of the document is entitled 'Present Problems of Inculturation'. One paragraph there stresses the transcendent character of the gospel in relation to cultures:

We cannot, however, forget the transcendence of the Gospel in relation to all human cultures in which the Christian faith has the vocation to root itself and come to fruition according to all its potentialities. However great the respect should be for what is true and holy in the cultural heritage of a people, this attitude does not demand that one should lend an absolute character to this cultural heritage. No one can forget that, from the beginning, the Gospel was a "scandal for the Jews and foolishness for the pagans."<sup>294</sup>

The title of the cited chapter is telling, 'Present Problems of Inculturation'. Quite apparently the authors of the document had noted occasions in which the transcendent character of the gospel had been endangered. This danger had occurred through an attitude in which cultures had been embraced uncritically and viewed as being capable of 'infusing' the Christian gospel without

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<sup>293</sup> EN 53 (Emphasis added.)

<sup>294</sup> Faith and Inculturation III,14.



necessary purification.<sup>295</sup> The cited ITC text pinpoints the basic challenge of inculturation: how the universality of the gospel and locality of cultures relate to one another.

The Office for Theological Concerns argues that “there is an Asian way of doing theology”.<sup>296</sup> This Asian approach is perhaps not primarily contradictory to the western approach but first and foremost an approach which takes into account the Asian contexts that are characterised by a plurality of religions, and cultures, and in which the Church is a minority religion. Furthermore, an Asian way of doing theology places the emphasis on seeking the right way, rather than merely truth<sup>297</sup>. However, the bishops argue that these two concepts, the way and the truth, are not contradictory. The truth reveals itself as the Asian pilgrim Church journeys on the way. The expression “Asian psyche” probably calls for an approach which is compatible with an Asian mindset and worldviews. Here again it means “Asian-ness”, an Asian way of thinking and doing.<sup>298</sup>

Above we noted that in the view of the FABC both the cultures and church need purification. In this model, Asian cultures are regarded very highly, as capable of providing something substantial to the Church. The ‘traffic’ does not move one direction, (from the gospel to cultures), but both directions in a reciprocal dialogical process in which both the Church and local context are enriched by mutual giving and receiving.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz (2010, 64-65) analyses Pope Benedict XVI’s 2006 Regensburg lecture. In Gaillardetz’s opinion, although Benedict does not oppose the process of cultural engagement by the church per se, he nevertheless believes that the European Christian form can never lose its priority. Here Gaillardetz also refers to an address by the then Cardinal Ratzinger where he spoke for the notion of interculturality where the dialogue takes place between the church’s own universal culture and other local cultures. This dialogue, however, would be asymmetrical because universal culture would always be given priority.

<sup>296</sup> “There is an Asian way of doing theology; however, always keeping in mind that the continent of Asia is a complex reality of Asian people. One can speak about an Asian approach to theology, not merely in contradistinction to the Western approach to theology, but as one situated by Asian psyche and certain measures which characterize the context of Asia, as for example, the plurality of religions, the plurality of cultures, the rampant poverty and the fact that practically all the Asian churches are young churches in a minority situation. Moreover, the Asian way of doing theology will reckon with the Asian way of life and the Asian way of thinking. In the Asian way of life and thinking, one would see an emphasis on Asians as seekers of the way rather than as merely seekers of truth.” OTC, Colloquium On the Asian Faces of Christ 2, FAPA 4, 286.

<sup>297</sup> OTC, Colloquium On the Asian Faces of Christ 2, FAPA 4, 286.

<sup>298</sup> The concept of the “way” brings to mind the Buddhist concept of the “middle way” or “middle path”, which describes the Buddhist way to liberation and salvation.

<sup>299</sup> Here the purification is not one-way; the bishops call the Asian Churches to interpret their own faith in the light of the Spirit-given seeds of the Word in other religions and faith-traditions. The OTC (FABC Papers 133, 44) sees negative elements in Asian cultural and religious traditions which need purification. The need for purification for all dialogue partners (the Church and other religions) is noted as the FABC comments: “Dialogue leads the partners to inner purification and total conversion if pursued with docility to the Spirit (RM 56). An authentic dialogue on the socio-political, cultural, religious and cosmic levels will help the Churches of Asia to be purified of their sin and to grow in their commitment to the Spirit of the risen Lord who is universally present and active.” Conclusions of the Theological Consultation 45, FAPA 2, 203.

Instead of (or perhaps in addition to) the concept inculturation, the term “interculturalization” also appears in the FABC documents. This term is employed when the Federation seeks appropriate ways for dialogue with cultures and religions: “As Asian, she [Church] is unthreatening, while challenging in her witness to Gospel values. In this sense, interculturalization means creative communication between cultures using the available living symbols. To this end, the Churches must be free to exercise their legitimate autonomy in making important decisions, without undue interference from higher authority.”<sup>300</sup> This text understands the Church to be a part and parcel of culture, in continual contact with its own contexts with their living traditions. In addition, this text reflects the provisional character of a contextual approach and theology repeatedly present in the FABC’s documents. Autonomy in making important decisions is called for, undoubtedly with the understanding that the local community is the best expert in matters pertaining to its own context.

Other significant FABC documents employing the term “interculturalization” are connected with interreligious dialogue, which is essentially intercultural dialogue as well. New Asian theologies and liturgies will emerge through this process, the bishops contend, and this process seeks to remain faithful both to Scripture and Christian tradition and to all that is good and holy in the life and culture of the people.<sup>301</sup> Thus, here the meaning of the concept of “interculturalization” is actually identical with inculturation. Lastly, the bishops identify interculturalization as the awareness of the

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<sup>300</sup> Conclusions of the Theological Consultation 21, FAPA 1, 340. Aloysius Pieris, Peter C. Phan and Felix Wilfred have paid attention to the terminology of inculturation vs. interculturalization. Pieris 1988, 51-58, is critical of how Western models of inculturation have been applied in Asia. In his opinion, the separation of religion from culture (as in Latin Christianity) and religion from philosophy (as in Hellenic Christianity) makes little sense in Asia because culture and religion are overlapping facets of one indivisible soteriology. In Pieris’s critique, the word “inculturation” is based on a dichotomy between culture and religion which often means the insertion of “the Christian religion minus European culture” into an “Asian culture minus non-Christian religion.” This will not succeed in Asia, Pieris argues, since religion and culture are so intertwined.

Phan 2003, 83, comments that inculturation is actually interculturalization: “As Michael Amaladoss and Aylward Shorter have reminded us, inculturation is always *interculturalization*. It is an encounter among at least three cultures – the Bible, the Christian tradition, and the people to whom the gospel is proclaimed.” Hence, one cannot separate Christian faith from certain cultural expressions and form. When comparing the two terms, inculturation and interculturalization, one can conclude that the first notion may presuppose a ‘culture-free’ core or kernel of the Christian gospel which is planted in various cultural ‘soils’ and which then produces fruit typical of each particular culture. Interculturalization seems to presume that also the proclaimed gospel is an irreversibly cultural product whose core one cannot extract from its cultural ‘wrappings’. Or, at best, it can happen only in dialogical process with Asian contextual realities. Wilfred (2005, 38-50) argues that inculturation presupposes a limited conception of culture. There is a risk that a people can impose on another people its culture and religion. But there will be no real inter-relationship in this case; it is a relationship of domination and subjugation. Real interculturalization also brings with it hermeneutical consequences. Wilfred writes: “We need to give up the pretension that we can transport from one culture to another the entire embodiment of Christian faith. It people encounter Christianity; they do it in their own way, and according to patterns inherent in their own cultural traditions. They may assimilate certain aspects of Christianity while leaving out other aspects.” (Wilfred 2005, 48.)

<sup>301</sup> FIRA IV, 5, FAPA 3, 140.

interaction and influence of cultures on each other. This calls the Church to pay attention to the enriching and dehumanizing factors of all cultures.<sup>302</sup>

If the concept of inculturation itself receives much attention in the FABC's documents, it is noteworthy to observe that, when entering the new millennium, the FABC's plenary assembly saw that it was time to begin acting integrally, rather than addressing various and different issues in their attempt to formulate their Christian identity in Asia.<sup>303</sup> Together with this new start, the word "inculturation" almost disappears from the Federation's documents.<sup>304</sup> What are possible reasons for this change? Is there a major change in theological orientation behind this development? Based on the discussion in the preceding chapters, we can surmise that this is not a likely reason. From its beginning, the FABC's theology has been the product of an evolving and developing process. One can only hypothesise that in this process the concept of inculturation has created debate and raised concern in theological circles. Thus, it might have become a controversial term.<sup>305</sup> Or, perhaps at the threshold of the new millennium the bishops saw that new perspectives were needed. Arguably, an integral approach served that purpose.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Consultation on Evangelization and Inculturation, FAPA 3, 218.

<sup>303</sup> The final statement of the seventh Plenary Assembly (2000) comments on the matter as follows: "For thirty years, as we have tried to reformulate our Christian identity in Asia, we have addressed different issues, one after another: evangelization, inculturation, dialogue, the Asia-ness of the Church, justice, option for the poor, etc. Today, after three decades, we no longer speak of such distinct issues. We are addressing present needs that are massive and increasingly complex. These issues are not separate topics to be discussed, but aspects of an integrated approach to our Mission and Love and Service. We need to feel and act "integrally." FABC 7, FAPA 3, 8.

<sup>304</sup> The term 'inculturation' does not appear in the latest (eleventh, 2016) and the second latest (tenth) FABC Plenary Assembly's statement (2012). Also, the third latest (ninth) Plenary Assembly's (2009) final statement the term 'inculturation' is used only once.

<sup>305</sup> Chinh 2002, 262-272, analyses the usage of the term 'inculturation' in the preparatory documents for the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA, 1999). In these curial documents "inculturation" appears very rarely. In Chinh's opinion, Rome feared that the emphasis on inculturation and dialogue compromises the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Thus, Rome holds a theological bias against inculturation. Before *Ecclesia in Asia* was promulgated, the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Asia (Asian Synod) was held in Rome in 1998. The preparatory phases for the synod included (1) selection of the theme, (2) outline of the synod topic in a document called *Lineamenta* and (3) the *Instrumentum Laboris* (Working Document) based on the bishops' reports given to the Lineamenta. The final phase, following the actual synod sessions, was the publication of *Ecclesia in Asia*.

<sup>306</sup> Schreiter (2001, 138) comments on the challenges to the concept of inculturation: "Why might there be a need to articulate a new theology and spirituality of mission, given the power and the fruitfulness of incarnation, accompaniment, and solidarity as guideposts in a missionary vision? I do not believe that any of these has been superseded. They will endure as part of the missionary vision, just as proclamation endures. Yet, to go back to the beginning point of this presentation, the context in which these three elements of missionary theology and spirituality came to the fore has changed. A refocus may be needed. Here are some aspects of the changed context that may point to a need of rethinking:

Inculturation finds itself caught between official resistance from central church authority, on the one hand, and the ideological use of ethnicity in the local church, on the other. Elsewhere it was noted how Theological Advisory Committee (TAC) analyses the impervious nature of the inner dimension of culture. See page... This implies that making lasting changes in the most important levels of culture is very difficult. Imposed, forced efforts will be met

In conclusion: in the opinion of the FABC, Asian cultures contain much substantial goodness and are capable of welcoming and including the Christian Gospel into themselves. However, in order to become even better and more complete, the cultures of Asia require the renewal effected by the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

Thus far, this chapter has discussed two contextual realities: religions and cultures. The topic of inculturation has focused on the specific question of how the Gospel can best take root in the soil of Asia. Our discussion can now turn to Asian socio-political realities, especially the poor. Its significance as a contextual reality arises from the fact that the vast majority of the peoples of Asia are poor. Because the theological process of the FABC takes place amidst the ebb and flow of lives of peoples of Asian peoples, it is important to examine how the Asian bishops view the contribution of this reality to their theology.

#### **4.4. The FABC in Dialogue with Asian Socio-Political Realities (the Poor)**

The third contextual reality to be examined is Asian socio-political realities, particularly the poor. In the following discussion, I will first pay attention to the FABC documents which discuss Asian socio-political realities and their importance for theology in general, followed by an analysis of the documents which address the specific theme of the poor. It will be argued that the poor have an especially significant theological function as the FABC create their Asian Catholic theology.

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with resistance. Thomas Menampampil (2012, 32) describes the importance of selfhood of a community and its resistance to a real or perceived threat: "In any case, I would strongly urge, never threaten the selfhood of communities. Selfhood is the most precious treasure they have.. their individuality; their self pride, their unique heritage. It is important to show absolute respect to this selfhood. If anything we do appears like a threat to the selfhood of a community, resistance is inevitable. However, what stands at the heart of this selfhood is not easy to define. Is it ethnicity, culture, language, lifestyle, cuisine, philosophy, or religious system? Threat (real or perceived) to the selfhood of a community can lead to tensions, conflict, even war. In the religious context, it has led to heresies and schisms. Inculturation is about constant attention to this selfhood and contributing to its enhancement." FABC Papers 132a, p. 32. Here Menampampil speaks primarily in the context of inculturation and sharing the 'Word of Life' in Asia in such a way that it does not threaten the inner identity, the Self, of Asia.

#### 4.4.1. Motivation for Becoming the Church of the Poor

In their practice of doing theology, the FABC identifies the poor as the third important contextual reality in Asia. As the OTC studies a suitable methodology for Asian Christian theology, it is especially the Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC which discusses the reality of the poor as a *locus theologicus*..<sup>307</sup>

How do the FABC define “the poor” and “poverty”? A 1979 FABC definition reads: “And by poverty, we understand (conscious of other definitions that may be given to it) “to be deprived of access to a full sharing in human brotherhood.”<sup>308</sup> In the FABC documents the poor often are paired together with the downtrodden<sup>309</sup> and the needy.<sup>310</sup> They suffer, cry and struggle for a full life.<sup>311</sup> Moreover, the poor are those who “are deprived of access to the material goods they need for a truly human life.”<sup>312</sup> Further, following the example of Jesus, the Church is called to “pitch its tent in the midst of all humanity building a better world, but especially among the suffering and the poor, the marginalized and the downtrodden of Asia... and follow Jesus in his “preferential journey” with the poor and will assist in the liberation of the materially poor, of indigenous peoples, displaced persons, victims of misguided economic and political development, victims of wars and divisions, victims of sex tourism.”<sup>313</sup> Hence, in the view of the FABC the poor even constitute a blanket term for those who are treated as non-persons, the deprived, the outcast and marginalised, the oppressed and downtrodden, those who do not count.<sup>314</sup>

The reasons and arguments for accepting the poor as a *locus theologicus* are manifold. First, it is a fact that vast majority of Asian people are poor; therefore, the poor are an unavoidable reality that the Asian bishops wish to use as a theological resource. Here the bishops use Biblical material as evidence of God’s preferential option for the poor. When the poor come together to struggle for a more just, humane, participatory, caring, and compassionate and equal society, they become a people. This process can be considered a theological reality.<sup>315</sup> Moreover, poor people’s religion is

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<sup>307</sup> In this context OTC Methodology 3.2.4.4. and 3.2.4.5. enlists the “Reality of the Poor” and “People’s Movements” as *loci theologici*. FAPA 3, 360-362.

<sup>308</sup> International Congress on Mission, I.1. FAPA 1, 143.

<sup>309</sup> FABC 4, 3.1.7., FAPA 1, 180.

<sup>310</sup> FABC 4, 4.8.5., FAPA 1, 196.

<sup>311</sup> FABC 4, 4.8.9., FAPA 1, 197.

<sup>312</sup> BISA I, 2, FAPA 1, 199.

<sup>313</sup> FABC 6, 14.2., FAPA 2, 8.

<sup>314</sup> TAC 27, FAPA 2, 222.

<sup>315</sup> OTC, Methodology 3.2.4.4., FAPA 3, 361.

mainly in the form of a cosmic religiosity which is marked by a this-worldliness where one is totally dependent on God. These facts mean that the poor are “bearers of the Word of God,... they are sacraments of God’s preferential love ... and vicars of Christ.... The poor brothers and sisters represent Christ. We must listen to them in discerning the mission of building the God’s Reign.”<sup>316</sup> Furthermore, the FABC explicitly describes the reality of the poor as a *locus theologicus*. “The *anawim* are the medium *par excellence* for a God-encounter.”<sup>317</sup>

As early as 1970, the International Congress on Mission of the FABC refers to the *anawim*, insisting that the Church must become the Church of the poor: “Unless the Church does her missionary activity with the firm conviction that the poor are ultimately the privileged community and agents of salvation ..., then that indispensable humility will be lacking, which alone reveals the truth about Christ, about man and about the Church herself. In its continual endeavour to become more and more the Church of the *anawim*, the Church does not merely work for the poor in the manner of a beneficent institution but more so with the poor ...”<sup>318</sup> Thus, in the view of the FABC, the poor also have a soteriological function. They are not merely, or even primarily, objects of the charitable activities of the Church, but rather are participants in the Church as it seeks its own identity and mode of being in Asia. Actually, the poor help the Church to become more truly an Asian Church.

When the Theological Advisory Commission reflects on the sufferings of Asia, the image of Jesus captures their imagination; Jesus “is the God who pitches his tent among us (Jn. 1:14). He empties himself to be in solidarity with the little ones, those treated as non-persons – the poor, and deprived, the outcast and marginalised, the oppressed and downtrodden, the sick, whose who do not count, children and women. He strikes at the natural upward mobility of humankind and goes down to the downtrodden, walks among them, lives with them, takes up their burdens, call them his friends (Lk. 4:18, 15:2).”<sup>319</sup> Further, Jesus “is most compassionate over the multitude. He weeps for an individual (Jn. 11:35-36), he weeps for the whole city.... He calls poor blessed, the Kingdom of God is theirs (Lk. 6:20). The homeless, the hungry, the naked – the little ones – bear his face.

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<sup>316</sup> OTC, Methodology 3.2.4.4., FAPA 3, 361.

<sup>317</sup> OTC, Methodology 3.2.4.4., FAPA 3, 360.

<sup>318</sup> International Congress on Mission, CPW 4, FAPA 1, 144. The OT term *anawim* is appears also elsewhere in the documents: “A prophetic spirituality moves us away from listening to the worldly voices, to becoming attentive listeners of God’s word. It demands moving from images of exterior organization, power or more secular effectiveness to images of simplicity, humble presence and service. It is the spirituality of the *anawim* in compassion for and solidarity with all, and especially suited to the poor.” TAC, 5.1.4., FAPA 2, 289. See also Quatra 2000,92: “Only through them [the poor] can emerge the true face of Christ, as well as the true face of the human person and of the Church.”

<sup>319</sup>TAC 27, FAPA 2, 222.

Uncompromising in defending the little ones, his healing touch, forgiving words, signal the compassionate irruption of the Kingdom of God into our space and time.”<sup>320</sup> Thus, the poor are not primarily the object of charitable actions, but they become active subjects in representing Christ and in advancing the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

Furthermore, the FABC also describes the significance of the poor for theology in Christological terms. The poor become vicars of Christ, a function which in the FABC’s view is affirmed especially in the last judgement scene (Mt 25). In women, children, the sick, the prisoner, the hungry, (i.e., in the poor), we meet Christ and serve Christ. For theology, they represent the reality of the presence of God and Christ. The poor brothers and sisters represent Christ. They must be listened to as the Church attempts to build God’s Reign.<sup>321</sup> The bishops find more Christological foundation for the significance of the poor as the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) reflects on the sufferings of Asia. Further, Jesus “is most compassionate over the multitude. He weeps for an individual (Jn. 11:35-36), he weeps for the whole city. ... He calls poor blessed, the Kingdom of God is theirs (Lk. 6:20). The homeless, the hungry, the naked – the little ones – bear his face.”<sup>322</sup> Uncompromising in defending the little ones, his healing touch, forgiving words, signal the compassionate irruption of the Kingdom of God into our space and time.”<sup>323</sup> Thus, the poor become active subjects in representing Christ and in advancing the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

A 1994 Faith Encounters in Social Action (FEISA, under the Office of Human Development) meeting argues that particularly through the option for the poor and marginalised, “the face of God turned towards humanity in the crucified Christ today in the faces of the broken people and in the wounds of the exploited earth” can be discovered.<sup>324</sup> The Third Bishops’ Institute for Social Action (BISA III, 1975) states “that Christ has a special love for the poor and wishes to be identified and served in the naked, hungry, thirsty, and imprisoned.”<sup>325</sup>

Finally, the Office of Theological Concerns finds Christological foundation for the significance of the poor in St. Paul’s words: “you know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ: he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> TAC 29, FAPA 2, 222-223

<sup>321</sup> OTC, Methodology 3.2.4.4., FAPA 3 361.

<sup>322</sup> Ninth Plenary Assembly (year 2009) puts together receiving Jesus in the Eucharist and welcoming him in the poor, the lonely, the lost, the weary, and the persecuted. Living Eucharist in Asia 2, FAPA 5, 32.

<sup>323</sup> TAC 29, FAPA 2, 222-223.

<sup>324</sup> FEISA 7.3.1., FAPA 2, 60.

<sup>325</sup> BISA III,4, FAPA 1, 208.

<sup>326</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2.4.4., FAPA 3, 361,

Another rationale and reason for aligning with the poor and marginalised is the model of the primitive Church which, the bishops say, was able to invent and reinvent “her way of being Church in each of the new situations she encountered.”<sup>327</sup> This practice of the primitive Church stands in contrast to the current situation of most local Churches in Asia, which “came with the colonial traders [...and] were transplanted from the “old world” to “new” lands” [...and] “came with a great sense of cultural and religious superiority.”<sup>328</sup> A 1994 FEISA meeting argues that “before Christianity got established as a structured religion, it was a spiritual movement: Jesus’ journey with the poor towards the Kingdom of God.”<sup>329</sup> . Therefore, the Church can now “re-discover its pristine dynamism” in being in “close dialogue with the poor and the religious cultures of Asia.”<sup>330</sup> In saying this, the participants of this meeting contend that the Asian poor and Asian religions can help the Asian Church to return to its original calling. Again, the recurrent theme of Asian contextual realities as important contributors to a better understanding and representation of the truth and of mission appears here.

A 2000 consultation arranged by the FABC calls for a new approach: “A New Way of Being Church” for mission of love and service for fuller humanity of people demands that we live the servant spirituality of Jesus and his kenosis (self-emptying). Only such a spirituality that integrates the way of the Cross will be able to motivate and sustain our commitment to an effective and credible advocacy on behalf of people, the powerless and marginalised.”<sup>331</sup>

The FABC also refers to the Church’s participation in the Paschal Mystery as a motivation to turn to the poor: “The Church is called to partake in the paschal mystery, and die to herself in order to be raised up with the Lord. The Church is in need of continual conversion and needs to “pass over” with Christ to the poor, to Asian cultures and to other religions.”<sup>332</sup>

This statement again indicates that the turn to Asian contextual realities advocated by the FABC is not merely an ethical or moral imperative, but that the FABC understands that through it the Church becomes more and more what it should be. The Church’s dialogue with Asian contextual realities helps the Church to become more of an Asian Church. Further, the paradigm of the Paschal Mystery implies that the Church has to die to itself, indicating that the process of becoming a truly Asian Church is not a painless process, but one requiring a genuine conversion and letting go of

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<sup>327</sup> Conclusions of Theological Consultation 17, FAPA 2, 197.

<sup>328</sup> Conclusions of Theological Consultation 17, FAPA 2, 197.

<sup>329</sup> FEISA 7.5.1., FAPA 2, 61.

<sup>330</sup> FEISA 7.5.1., FAPA 2, 61.

<sup>331</sup> Consultation on Advocacy for Justice and Peace, 6.7, FAPA 3, 54.

<sup>332</sup> Conclusions of Theological Consultation, II, 16, FAPA 1, 338.



something ‘old’ so that the new might be born. A new way of being Church in Asia and a truly Asian Church representing and serving the truth and salvation of Christ can only come about “by the Passion and Rising again of Christ entering our lives.”<sup>333</sup> Thus, the presence of the poor is not merely an existing fact in Asia nor is the preferential option for the poor only a practical, ethical imperative. The poor serve the Church in its process of becoming a truly Asian Church. In a similar manner, the fourth Plenary Assembly (1986) of the FABC discusses the question about the poor in the context of the Reign of God or Kingdom of God:

The memory of Jesus brings the disciple to seek the Reign of God (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 31) in the world, to be poor, to thirst for justice, to trust completely in the Father as little children do, for of such is the kingdom of heaven. Seeking the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed is really to build it in the concrete experiences of the social, political, economic, religious and cultural world of Asia... The struggle for fullness of life in Asia is a seeking of the Kingdom. Discipleship then is not at all a withdrawal from the world, but an immersion into the well-spring of Asian reality so that it might have life.<sup>334</sup>

Therefore, as sacraments of God’s preferential love the poor contribute to the arrival of God’s Kingdom in a positive way. In them, others can see God and hear God. Their presence is also a living challenge to the Church to make a similar, preferential option for them, following the example of Jesus.

As already noted, the FABC uses the term “poor” broadly. The term covers a range of marginalised, exploited and downtrodden people. In the FABC’s view, in their faith in the preferential love of God for them, the poor are bearers of the Word of God. “In other words, they are sacraments of God’s preferential love. This sacramental word from the poor will tell us of God’s norms for personal and social life as the norms of God’s Reign. “To listen to God is to listen to the poor.” In the Biblical tradition, “the little ones” are the favoured ones of God, to whom the Father and the Son reveal themselves.”<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>333</sup>FABC 2, 44, FAPA 1, 37.

<sup>334</sup> FABC 4, 4.8.7., FAPA 1, 196-197. C.f. BIRA IV/10, 8, FAPA 1, 314: “Through Christ and in Christ the Kingdom of God has come and is now processing to its fulfillment. It is a force transforming the world. Necessarily, the Kingdom of God confronts the forces of injustice, violence and oppression. These forces combined from structures of sin, from which we need to be liberated. We uphold the preferential option for the poor, since they are victims of these structures. Hence, solidarity with the poor is a response to the Good News of God’s Kingdom”. Quatra’s comments on this question are correct: “The universal Reign of God cannot begin on this earth if the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized of this continent are abandoned in the conditions into which the structures of sin have enclosed them. The universality of the Kingdom in Asia is realized, therefore, in a particular meaningful way through the solidarity with these people. ... Solidarity with the poor makes the Church more sensitive to the reality of the Kingdom, and more capable of perceiving clearly those Gospel values that are an evident testimony of the transforming presence of the same Kingdom in the life of the oppressed.” Quatra, 2000, 53.

<sup>335</sup> OTC, Methodology, 3.2.4.4., FAPA 3, 361.

God's preferential option for the poor calls for a life of equality, dignity, freedom and solidarity for all.<sup>336</sup> The struggles of the poor for liberation are God's challenge to their oppressors to convert.<sup>337</sup> The poor represent a cosmic religiosity, which also serves as a resource for theology: it is a theology which is marked by this-worldliness focused on life's basic needs. "Having little, they are totally dependent on God. God is a "God of rice and curry." They cry to God for justice in their struggles here and now."<sup>338</sup>

One specific group that receives the FABC's attention is Asian women and their plight. What does the Federation have to say about them?

#### 4.4.2. The Plight of Asian Women

The FABC names women as one particular group which is often exploited. The FABC's interest in and recognition of the importance of women has increased over the years. The plight of Asian women was addressed for the first time in 1986 in the FABC documents of the fourth Plenary Assembly in Tokyo.<sup>339</sup> The FABC's women's desk was established in 1995. After that, several conferences on women's issues were organised.<sup>340</sup> The final statement of a 1995 consultation states:

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<sup>336</sup> OTC, Methodology 3.2.4.4., FAPA 3, 360.

<sup>337</sup> OTC, Methodology 3.2.4.4., FAPA 3, 360. Pieris (1988, 20-23) comments that there basically are two different kinds of poverty: voluntary poverty and forced poverty. Voluntary poverty is being poor by option, which means that one gives up something and is inherently oriented toward the liberation of the poor. Further, this first type of poverty is an evangelical poverty, embraced for the purpose of following of Christ. Pieris calls this poverty "the seed of liberation." The second type of poverty is "the fruit of sin", the poor by "birth" who are the proxies of Christ. Pieris refers to St. Basil, who formed a small community which earned its basic needs and thought that what is owned by those who are dedicated to God belongs to God and must thus be given to the poor. Pieris further combines these two kind of poverty by connecting them to inculturation and ecclesiology: "A church inculturated in Asia is indeed a church liberated from mammon, and is therefore necessarily composed of the poor: poor by option and poor by circumstances. In other words, inculturation is the *ecclesiological* revolution already initiated by basic human communities, with Christian and non-Christian membership, wherein mysticism and militancy meet and merge: *mysticism* based on voluntary poverty and *militancy* pitched against forced poverty." Pieris 1988, 57.

<sup>338</sup> OTC, Methodology 3.2.4.4., FAPA 3, 361.

<sup>339</sup> The assembly paid attention to many types of injustice and discrimination against women. On the other hand, the bishops argue at the Tokyo plenary assembly that "there is a deep and genuine appreciation of women among Asians." FABC 4, 3.3.2, FAPA 1, 183. Nevertheless, the assembly call for recognition of the full personhood of women and that the Church ought to speak powerfully about the plight of women and also become their voice. This would mean that the entire people of God would become a credible sign of the dignity and freedom of women. FABC 4, 3.3.5.-3.3.6, FAPA 1, 183.

<sup>340</sup> The first consultation concentrating explicitly on women was Bishops' Institute for Lay Apostolate's (BILA 1995 ) meeting "Role of Women in Church and Society Toward 2000". It was followed by BILA on Women II (1998), BILA on Women III (2001) and meetings organised by the FABC's Women's desk in 2002, 2003, and 2005 respectively.

“The Bishops of Asia are listening”, “And the bishops are touched.”<sup>341</sup> Especially since that moment, in several instances the FABC has paid attention to the plight of women. They, together with children, are identified as groups that are ill-treated and exploited.<sup>342</sup> Also, despite their being in the image and of the likeness of God, women are often dominated in various ways. Their dignity and freedom need to be restored, by means of legislation as well.<sup>343</sup> The lack of recognition of women and their gifts in the Church prevents the Church from being a sign of the Kingdom of God and an eschatological community.<sup>344</sup> In the statement of the fifth Plenary Assembly the bishops continue their analysis as they note: “Traditional patterns of discrimination against women continue in force. In situations of poverty and injustice it is usually women who suffer the most. We see this in the flourishing of exploitative tourism, where women and children are driven into prostitution -- this is both a matter of sexual morality and also a matter of structural injustice.”<sup>345</sup>

The FABC has also explicitly discussed the role of women in the Church. Patriarchy in societies, the FABC comments, keeps women in their subordinate position.<sup>346</sup> Thus, their contribution is lost. It is therefore necessary that women’s dignity as equal to men be upheld. Concrete means to this end include denouncing cultural practices that violate the human dignity of women.<sup>347</sup> A 1995

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<sup>341</sup> BILA on Women, 1.1., 1.3., FAPA 2, 91.

<sup>342</sup> FABC 3, I. FAPA 1, 62.

<sup>343</sup> FABC 4, .3.3.3., FAPA 1, 183.

<sup>344</sup> FABC 4, 3.3.5., FAPA 1, 183.

<sup>345</sup> FABC 5, 2.2.1, FAPA 1, 277. It is worth noting that the most authoritative body of the FABC, the Plenary Assembly, has repeatedly paid attention to the plight and exploitation of Asian women. This attention continues in the final statement of the sixth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, where the gathered bishops note that Jesus’ preferential journey with the poor will lead the Church to assist in the liberation of materially poor, of indigenous peoples, displaced persons, victims of wars, and victims of sex tourism. The Church commits itself for assisting in the integral development of women, children and the youth who cry for liberation. FABC 6, 14.2., FAPA 2, 8. The theme appears also in the final statement of the tenth Plenary Assembly (year 2012): “For more than a decade now the Church in Asia has considered women as a major pastoral priority...We strongly denounce the abuse of women...Not only do we need to recognize the objective equality of men and women before God but we also have to implement *relational* equality in daily life for a more effective and credible mission of evangelization and integral social transformation.” FABC 10, 29, FAPA 5, 66 (emphasis in original).

<sup>346</sup> Here the FABC cites the 1995 letter of Pope John Paul II to women in which the Pope asks pardon for the wrongs and insensitivities that had been perpetuated against women in the Church. BILA 7, 4.1., FAPA 2, 94. Pope’s letter mentions patriarchy in Asian families and societies as a sad and determining factor in Asia. This is woven into Asian worldview, which includes gender inequality and the superior role of the men. It lies deep in the religious and cultural subconscious of Asia. It is at the basis of the male chauvinism and of men’s authoritarianism. It regards women as subordinate to men and establishes double standards to govern the behaviour of men, women, boys and girls. FABC 8, 27, FAPA 4, 10.

<sup>347</sup> Here the FABC lists the following: female feticide and infanticide, genital mutilation, child labour, dowry practice, prostitution, trafficking of women and children and sex tourism. BILA 7, 4.3., FAPA 2, 95. A Consultation on women of the FABC notes that “Interpretations of women’s position in religion and culture tend to reinforce the subordinate position of women. The schools of spirituality are also male-dominated and tend to emphasise Mary as meek and humble mother and virgin, while neglecting her important role in discipleship. In the Church, the participation of women is an extension of their domestic role. They have little role in decision making.” FAPA 2, 115. Another document discusses “a journey with the Spirit into fuller life”: it notes that that women are at the heart of the Asian family and as such they are at the forefront in the struggle for justice and freedom. TAC 22, FAPA 2, 221.

Bishops' Institutes on Lay Apostolate (BILA) meeting recommends a quota of at least of 30 percent participation of women in all Church organisations and councils. Also, the meeting recommends that women's theology should be introduced in seminaries and formation centres and that women ought to have more opportunities to study theology.<sup>348</sup> The Asian Church is called to understand who Jesus is in the Asian context; he empties himself to be in solidarity with those treated as non-persons and with those who do not count, including children and women. He does this also by calling women to be his close disciples.<sup>349</sup> In this, Jesus showed his great respect for and sensitivity to women. Jesus' actions invite the Church and society to a deep conversion.<sup>350</sup>

Yet another perspective on enhancing and improving the position of women and making their participation more possible is the recognition of the existence of women's movements and the rising consciousness of women in Asia: "They struggle not only for justice, equality and rights, but also for a new vision of society, for a wholeness in human relationships. This includes a critique of the existing society, its institutions and arrangements, with a vision to move towards a just, humane, participatory, compassionate, peaceful world."<sup>351</sup> This "feminine" is accepted as a theological

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<sup>348</sup> BILA 7, 4.4., FAPA 2, 95. In same way also in OHD IV.2, FAPA 3, 37. On this particular point it is interesting to note that most studies on the FABC's theology have been written by men. Also, women's/feminist theological questions have not garnered much interest in studies related to the FABC. However, a welcome correction to this apparent lack is the dissertation of Thao Nguyen *A new way of being church for mission Asian Catholic bishops and Asian Catholic women in dialogue: A study of the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (2013). In addition, a number of *FABC Papers* ([http://www.fabc.org/offices/csec/ocsec\\_fabc\\_papers.html](http://www.fabc.org/offices/csec/ocsec_fabc_papers.html)) discuss women's questions, especially discussion guides written as preparatory material for the FABC plenary assemblies. One response to the need to have voices of Asian Catholic women theologians heard is the organisation Ecclesia of Women in Asia (<http://ecclesiaofwomen.ning.com/>), a forum of Asian Catholic women theologians. It seeks to do theology from Asian women's perspectives and to advocate for the recognition of Asian Catholic women theologians as colleagues in theological discussion both in the Church and in the academy. The Forum was born at a theological conference which discussed the papal post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999). "At this conference, the 4 women present began to ask some soul-searching questions: Are there women theologians in Asia? Why are they not at our Catholic universities? If they do enter they are often considered as western because they deal with feminist issues. They are also expected to talk only about women, and when they talk about women they are not considered real theologians. Are they influential in curricula development? Many Asian women theologians do contextual theology: What would they say about the Asian reality?" <http://ecclesiaofwomen.ning.com/forum/topics/ewas-herstory> (Accessed February 11, 2015). The first conference of the Forum was held in 2002 in Bangkok under the title "Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced".

<sup>349</sup> TAC 27-28, FAPA 2, 222.

<sup>350</sup> FABC 7, 2, FAPA 3, 10. In some FABC documents, Mary is seen as a figure of encouragement and a source of inspiration for women: "May Mary, our model of discipleship, woman of courage and woman of action, inspire and be with us in our journey towards fullness of life for all, especially women, so that they can exercise their service to life in Asia. May her Magnificat echo in our hearts to help bring about the reign of God's love, peace, justice and harmony in the third millennium." BILA on Women II, 5.2., FAPA 3, 77.

<sup>351</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2.4.1., FAPA 3, 359-360. Gemma Tulud Cruz (2014, 302-314) writes on Christianity and Asian Women. She summarises the ambiguity of Christianity in being both on the side of Asian women and also reinforcing their oppression: "Whether direct or indirect, in theory or practice, Christianity played and continues to play both the role of protagonist and villain for Asian women by reinforcing their oppression and, at the same time, contributing to their liberation.. Christianity, in other words, plays a double-edged role when it comes to the cause of Asian women."

resource and consequently, they say, it should be welcomed in theological reflection.<sup>352</sup> A 2004 ecumenical “Asia conference” of theological students in which the FABC participated sees the need for introducing courses on feminist theologies in the curricula of theological seminaries and institutions. The conference participants argue that, in actuality, “Asian feminism is rooted in a long tradition in Asia (as early as 500 B.C.E. in Buddhism and 11<sup>th</sup> century in Confucianism) of the concern for better treatment of women and girls in many societies where cultural practices, customs and beliefs have subjugated and oppressed women.”<sup>353</sup> Thus, Asian feminist theologies are rooted in the long tradition of struggles for women and also in the biblical tradition that women and men are created in the very image of God.<sup>354</sup>

To summarise the FABC’s efforts for the betterment of the position of Asian women both in church and society, it seems that the Federation recognises a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, the subordinate position of women is entwined with the hierarchical structures of the church and of Asian societies. On the other hand, however, the bishops seem to be willing to hear and listen the plight of women because such action is in line with the FABC’s preferential option for the poor, which includes Asian women.

#### **4.4.3. The Poor as Dialogue Partners of the Church**

In the fourth Plenary Assembly (1986), the bishops argue that the Church needs to listen to the Word of God which is present “in events, in the ebb and flow of life” and “listen to the poor and the needy and reach out to them as Jesus did.”<sup>355</sup> This statement of the fourth Plenary Assembly is also programmatic for the Asian Church: reaching out to the poor also implies sharing the poverty of the poor. This means that the Church places itself at the side of the multitudes of the Asian continent.<sup>356</sup>

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Cruz 2014, 310. See also Sharon A. Bong ‘s (2014, 182-194) *Gender, Sexuality, and Christian Feminist Movements in Asia* on the trajectories of Asian feminist theologies Christian feminist movements in Asia in the past three decades.

<sup>352</sup> OTC Methodology 3.2.4.1. FAPA 3, 360.

<sup>353</sup> Second Asia Conference, 16, FAPA 4, 209.

<sup>354</sup> Second Asia Conference, 17, FAPA 4, 210. When encountering social ills and many exploited and downtrodden people, the Asian bishops inevitably face the question about liberation. What is the Christian, gospel-rooted response to these challenges? Is it fitting to call FABC’s theology at this point a theology of liberation? This question will be discussed in chapter 4.5.

<sup>355</sup> FABC 4, 4.8.5., FAPA 1, 196.

<sup>356</sup> ABM 19, FAPA 1, 5.

The bishops associate this siding with the poor and marginalised and serving them beyond any religious beliefs with the holiness of God, which causes the Church to become holy.<sup>357</sup>

In their theology, the Asian Catholic bishops mention together the themes of the emergence and fulfilment of the Kingdom of God through Christ, the preferential option for the poor and the need of conversion. The arrival of the Kingdom transforms the world and confronts the forces of injustice, violence and oppression. The poor are victims of these structures; thus, they need liberation from them. In order to be able to do this, Christians need to convert by recognising their own failures and abandoning their self-image as sole possessors of the Kingdom.<sup>358</sup> The pattern described here is not static, but is a process into which the Asian Church is challenged to enter. The Church offers “the radical freedom in Christ” and sets out its way in following “Jesus in his preferential journey with the poor.”<sup>359</sup> This is the frequently repeated theme of the Asian Wayfarer, the pilgrim Church.

From the above analysis, it is apparent that in the context of Asian socio-political realities as well, especially the poor, the Asian bishops’ approach is that of a process whereby the Asian poor and their plight are received as dialogue partners. On this way together, the poor become indispensable contributors for the betterment of their own lives and societies. In turn, the Church learns from the poor as it seeks to better express and reflect the truth of the Gospel. This approach is explicitly affirmed in the following passage, which can be understood as delineating the contextual-theological orientations of the FABC. Thus it will be cited at length:

In keeping with the renewal inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council, we explored how a contextual model of being Church might look like in Asia. For sure, this Church has to be rooted in the Asian socio-cultural matrix and remain grounded on Asian soil. It is a Church which is not only respectful of the peoples and surroundings of Asia but very much identified with them and especially the poor and common people. To be able to move forward the contextual Church must be in direct contact with the peoples and religions of Asia. These religions enrich the Church as much as the Church enriches them. Together they are journeying on a pilgrimage where the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of justice, peace and love, is the end goal. Such a model is what FABC has often referred to as a Church engaged in the

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<sup>357</sup> “The Church to become holy is to become integral – that is bringing together personal commitment and opening ourselves to community and society. God is the source of this Holiness. Thus, to become Holy is to carry out his mission- to serve the poor and marginalised far beyond the boundaries of any religious beliefs.” FEISA IV 2, FAPA 4, 85.

<sup>358</sup> BIRA IV/10, II, 8,9, FAPA 1, 314.

<sup>359</sup> FABC 6, 14.2., FAPA 2, 8. Here the document specifically mentions several areas of human life into which the Church should “offer the radical freedom of life in Christ”: “the liberation of the materially poor, of indigenous peoples, displaced persons, victims of misguided economic and political development, victims of wars and divisions, victims of sex tourism. ... the integral development of women, children and the youth, who cry out for liberation from many dehumanizing and oppressive situations and for their rightful place in society and in the Church’s mission to serve life.” Further: “With our Asian sisters and brothers, we will strive to foster communion among Asian peoples who are threatened by glaring economic, social and political imbalances. With them we will explore ways of utilizing the gifts of our diverse religions, cultures and languages to achieve a richer and deeper Asian unity. We will build bridges of solidarity and reconciliation with peoples of other faiths and will join hands with everyone in Asia in forming a true community of creation.” FABC 4, 14.2., FAPA 2, 8.

triple dialogue: dialogue with the poor, the religions and the cultures of Asia. This contextual model of being Church is not only faithful to the needs of the time and the context but also to the summons of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>360</sup>

This text is an apt and even paradigmatic summary of the important contextual-theological orientations of the FABC. This passage subscribes to the theology of the Second Vatican Council, but what it sees as especially important in Vatican II is the renewal inaugurated by the Council. Thus, the renewal is an unfinished task; it needs to be implemented in the Asian continent. The renewal initiated by Vatican II prompts the Asian Church to a journey in which it is indispensable to be rooted in the Asian socio-cultural matrix and on Asian soil. Moving forward in this journey, the Church dialogues with Asian contextual realities, especially the poor. The dialogue with the poor, as well as Asian religions and cultures, enriches both sides of the dialogue. These are the important parameters of a common pilgrimage which leads to the realisation of the Kingdom of God.

This text also reveals the three important guiding principles of the Asian pilgrim Church which seem to be crucial parameters in the contextual theology of the FABC : (1) the Asian pilgrim Church is a Church which is faithful to its own tradition; (2) it is a Church which seeks to implement the renewal initiated by the Vatican II; and (3) it is a Church which dialogues with the contextual realities of Asia. Thus, I argue that the FABC's contextual theology is best understood within the framework of these parameters listed here. This description shows the provisional character of the Asian contextual theology of the FABC, which, according to the words of the Federation, "is a new enterprise marked by a certain experimental character, a certain ambiguity, uncertainty and tenuousness. It is not yet a finished product, given the dynamic nature of the theological enterprise envisioned. It is rather a pilgrimage."<sup>361</sup>

A theologically significant document produced by the Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC in 2010, puts the important paradigm of an Asian contextual theology as developed by the Federation from the beginning to the present time in the following way: "While we are faithful to our faith tradition, the Church in Asia has to reckon with the concrete humanity of Asian peoples rooted in their own socio-cultural and religious traditions. Their understanding of humanity becomes the path of our journey on mission. In the changing contextual realities of Asia, we encounter God who has called us to mission."<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> FIRA V, 9, FAPA 4, 199.

<sup>361</sup> OTC Methodology, FABC 3, 331.

<sup>362</sup> FABC Papers 133, 3.

Above it was noted that the FABC generally assesses Asian cultures in a predominantly positive way. Yet, the bishops admit that “the Gospel critically challenges cultures. Christians must learn to discern the good, true, and beautiful, which they seek to support and integrate into their lives, from values that must be transformed or even rejected.”<sup>363</sup> Having come to this point, one needs to ask how the Asian bishops actually tackle questions about evil, social ills and moral defects both personal and collective. Theologically, this question leads to the question of sin and Asian contextual realities. This is the topic of the next subchapter.

#### **4.5. The Question of Sin with Regard to Asian Contextual Realities**

The above analysis has argued that the FABC predominantly appraises Asian cultures and religions positively. However, this appreciation is not entirely uncritical. Thus, it is important to ask how the FABC sees the question of sin and of deficiencies in Asian cultures and religions. The term ‘sin’ does not appear often in the FABC documents. Nevertheless, on several occasions the documents of the Federation address the topic itself and its consequences.

First, the FABC documents discuss the notion of sin in connection with the ministry of Jesus. Jesus’ ministry initiated the Kingdom of God, and in his ministry the demons fled and sinners were liberated. He saw sinners as worthy of his compassion, and he liberated them from the shackles of evil.<sup>364</sup> The concept of sin is also addressed within a traditional framework of reconciliation effected by Christ. Through Christ, human beings now have peace with God and they have become free from sin and death.<sup>365</sup> The documents refer several times to the Johannine image of Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” and who through his death and resurrection destroyed sin and also gathered the scattered children of God into one.<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> OESC 4, FAPA 2, 22.

<sup>364</sup> FABC 6, 13.2., FAPA 2, 6: “At his word, demons flee, sinners are liberated. At his touch, the sick are healed. He frees the victims of society from the evil and sin that shackle them. He restores them to communion. He breaks down barriers set up by greed, pride, discrimination, lopsided social norms and even religious distortions. Outcasts become sisters and brothers. Sinners are worthy of compassion. The hungry, the thirsty, the prisoners, the naked bear the divine presence. And God is our Father. In the freedom and communion that Jesus offers, a new creation dawns. The human community is reborn. Indeed the time of fulfilment has come. Life in abundance is in our midst. The Kingdom is here (Lk 17:21).”

<sup>365</sup> TAC, 3.3.2.3., FAPA 2, 271-272.

<sup>366</sup> E.g. TAC 3.3.2.5., FAPA 2, 273: “In the Johannine perspective Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29) and to give humankind life in abundance (Jn 10:10).”



When discussing liberation, the second Plenary Assembly (1978) of the FABC emphasises the importance of prayer: “Christian prayer is necessary if we are to bring the spirit and power of the Gospel and the Christ-life into the effort to achieve genuine human liberation and development. This involves the shaping of human persons to the likeness of Jesus.”<sup>367</sup> Prayer also helps in understanding the selfishness and sinfulness of the human heart.<sup>368</sup> Further, prayer also invokes the Holy Spirit who then brings about conversion of heart and helps in discerning those tasks and deeds that are needed “to bring about conversion in men’s hearts and renewal of societal structures.”<sup>369</sup>

Thus, in the very first years of the existence of the Federation the idea existed of both the heart’s freedom from the bondage of sin as well as its societal consequences. In the same document the bishops link the gifts of prayer, faith, love and hope with liberation from sin and its consequences in society.

Since the concept of “liberation” appears often in the FABC documents, we should ask whether the FABC’s contextual theology can also be interpreted within the framework of liberation theology.

Ruben Mendoza discusses this question at length and in a thorough manner in his 2009 doctoral dissertation.<sup>370</sup> Mendoza notes that Latin American liberation theology has contributed to the emergence of Asian liberation theologies. However, there are several differences between these theologies which have emerged on two different continents. Mendoza, following the schema of Felix Wilfred, identifies nine differences in terms of focus and emphasis. First, the contexts are different: in Latin America the context predominantly Christian, whereas in Asia it is inter-religious. Second, following from the first point, the faith resources of other religions have to be utilized in creating an Asian liberation theology; there are poor and marginalized people along the spectrum of faith and religious convictions. Third, Latin American liberation theology employs the Bible as its main source whereas in Asia the sources of other religions have something to contribute as to how other religions have responded to injustice and struggles in Asian societies. Fourth, in Latin America integral liberation is emphasised, but in Asia a dimension of inner and interior

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<sup>367</sup> FABC 2, 22, FAPA 1, 33.

<sup>368</sup> “[I]t is prayer which brings us to the understanding of how injustice is rooted in selfishness and sinfulness of men’s hearts.” FABC 2, 23, FAPA 1, 33

<sup>369</sup> FABC 2, 23, FAPA 1, 33. The bishops further elucidate the importance of prayer in bringing about liberation: “Christian prayer is necessary for genuine human liberation and development, and to bring man to his full stature as a son of God. Prayer commits us to the true uplift of the poor and the powerless, the oppressed and the marginalized. Prayer also brings us to understand how injustice is rooted in sinfulness and selfishness of men’s hearts. It is prayer which calls on the Spirit to create within us both the courage and the love to bring about a conversion in men’s hearts and the renewal of all structures of society.” FABC 2, IV., 18, FAPA 1, 41.

<sup>370</sup> *A Church in Dialogue with Peoples of Other Faiths: A Journey to the Kingdom in the Spirit* (2009)

liberation which is personally experienced and manifested, is added. "Fifth, while the Latin America liberation theology attempted to integrate action and contemplation, the praxis of liberation in Asia is viewed simultaneously **as a process of liberation of the self, society and the nature are organically linked together by common bonds of unity.**"<sup>371</sup> . Sixth, Latin American biblical reflections are useful but not adequate in the process of creating an Asian liberation theology since they do not deal with religious pluralism. Seventh, although on both continents concern for the poor and oppressed is a matter of shared concern, the ways in which the Asian poor express their plight is different from Latin America. Therefore, Asian liberation theology has to be responsive to the needs of the Asian poor and oppressed. Eighth, the Marxist analysis of society is not generally advocated in Asia. In Asia, one must also include ethnic, racial, cultural, linguistic, religious and caste factors in the analysis. And finally, as Mendoza notes, "Latin American liberation theology has made use of the dialectical approach in relation to the task of liberation. Wilfred contends that, in addition to dialectics, Asian theologies of liberation include both compassion and harmony."<sup>372</sup>

From Mendoza's discussion, we can conclude that despite the similarities in vocabulary with Latin American liberation theologies, it does not seem to be correct to interpret the Asian interpretation as being *in toto* the same kind of liberation theology as those of Latin America. Both models are contextual theologies. Thus, different contexts have much influence on how theologies are created. In Asia, it is especially Asian religions and Asia's organic and harmonious worldview which bring about a different outcome and types of contextual theologies. Nevertheless, on both continents Jesus is seen as a great liberator, and his important mission is understood as one of liberating people from the shackles of sin, which also are visible in the sinful and destructive structures of societies.

Sin and its consequences are very much practical matters and encountered in everyday life, in the realities of Asia. Christian spirituality has to be incarnated. This encounter with tensions and struggles then becomes an arena for the growth and maturing of Christian spirituality.<sup>373</sup> A 1975 BISA gathering discusses social dimensions of the gospel and notes that the understanding of sin and grace has to be broadened to include the social area as well. This broadened perspective

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<sup>371</sup> Mendoza 2009, 94 (emphasis in original).

<sup>372</sup> Mendoza 2009, 95.

<sup>373</sup> FABC 4, 4.8.3., FAPA 1, 195. For concise introduction to current trends in Asian contextual theologies, see, e.g., *Asian Theology on the Way- Christianity, culture and context.* (ed. by Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, 2012). This book covers Asian postcolonial feminist theologies, Asian Christologies, Minjung theology, and Dalit theology, among others.

emerges from biblical experience and the analysis of the human sciences.<sup>374</sup> On this point, again, the approach is integral: it seeks to bring together both the biblical data and material gained from contextual analysis. In this context, the FABC uses the term “conscientization”.<sup>375</sup> The FABC regard it as an important concept which emphasises the importance of justice.<sup>376</sup> It is probable that by choosing this particular term the FABC wishes to voice their criticism against the social injustice in Asia. The local Churches are encouraged to act for the renewal of the structures of society.

It is also important to pay attention to the concept of truth in relation to sin and injustice. Truth is not merely a philosophical or theoretical matter, but the documents of the FABC connect it very much to ethical and moral values. The TAC links it with justice and freedom: “If Christians and their Churches are to become effective instruments of reconciliation and harmony among peoples, there arises a need to revise some of the ethical and moral values regarding truth, justice and freedom.”<sup>377</sup> These moral values “were meant to preserve the ethic and aesthetic of right relationships in the original harmony. They were meant to regulate and shape the relationship and collaboration of people in favor of harmony.”<sup>378</sup> The document laments that these values have lost their radical nature as originally taught in the Gospels. Thus, they need to be rediscovered according to Christ’s teaching, together with the enrichment provided by the understanding of the religious-cultural heritage of Asian peoples. In the opinion of the Commission, this task is an urgent one for

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<sup>374</sup>BISA II, 6, FAPA 1, 204. Peter Phan also discusses the differences between Latin American and Asian liberation theologies: “Whereas the Catholic Church in Latin America has been more concerned with the socio-economic oppression of the poor and marginalized, and hence was more focused on liberation, Asian Christians, while also concerned with the issues of justice, as we shall see below, have been more engaged in the inculturation of the Christian faith. Of course, these two aspects—liberation and inculturation—are not understood as two competing and unrelated tasks. Indeed, it is a fundamental axiom of Asian theologians and the FABC that they cannot and must not be separated from each other. Liberation without inculturation suffers from a truncated anthropology which sees humans simply as economic beings, while inculturation without liberation becomes an elitist, antiquarian quest irrelevant to people’s lives..” Phan 2006, 115 (FABC Papers 117).

<sup>375</sup> The concept of conscientization is translated from the Portuguese word *conscientização*. Other English translations include ‘consciousness raising’ and ‘critical consciousness’. The term was developed and popularised by the Brazilian educator, activist and social activist Paulo Freire (1921-1997) in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Portuguese: *Pedagogia do Oprimido*, 1968). The book is based on Marxist critical theory. The Freire Institute lists some key concepts of Paulo Freire on their website. There conscientization is defined as follows: “The process of developing a critical awareness of one’s social reality through reflection and action. Action is fundamental because it is the process of changing the reality. Paulo Freire says that we all acquire social myths which have a dominant tendency, and so learning is a critical process which depends upon uncovering real problems and actual needs.” <http://www.freire.org/component/easytagcloud/118-module/conscientization/> (Accessed May 13, 2014).

<sup>376</sup> BISA II, 7, FAPA 1, 204. The concept of conscientization appears elsewhere in FABC-document: see, for example, FABC 2, 4.7.2.1., FAPA 1, 194 (conscientization is needed in formation of especially the laity); FABC 6, 4, FAPA 2, 3 (the goal of conscientization the local Churches is not yet reached); OTC, Methodology 4.2.6., FAPA 3, 377 (in connection with Dalit theology in which the beginning of the Dalit movement is seen as a result of conscientization “wherein the outcasts of the country were awakening to their dignity and to their political power.”)

<sup>377</sup>TAC 5.2.3, FAPA 2, 293.

<sup>378</sup>TAC 5.2.3. FAPA 2, 293.

the healing of Asian situations of disharmony.<sup>379</sup> The document also notes that “calling for a new ethic of harmony which emphasizes the values of truth, justice and human freedom” does not mean “a reduction of Christianity to a set of ethical and moral values, or to a new liberalism.”<sup>380</sup> This emphasis rather makes “Asian Christianity more faithful to the Gospel and more relevant to the Asian need for harmony.”<sup>381</sup> As the FABC theologians continue their search for a more Asian theology, they call the Asian Churches and Christians to be active agents for love, truth, justice and human dignity according to the model of Christ who is called “the Sacrament of the New Harmony”, who died because of his proclamation for “love, truth, justice and the dignity of the human being.” “Christ as the sacrament of the new harmony can be realized only by our courageous witness to these values.”<sup>382</sup>

Combating sin is also connected to the Kingdom of God initiated by Christ. This Kingdom confronts sin, and its process towards fulfilment brings about transformation of the world. The coming of the Kingdom also requires the conversion of Christians, and calls for solidarity with the poor because they are victims of sinful structures.<sup>383</sup>

Moreover, a 1988 BIRA meeting contends that overcoming sin includes struggle against the powers of sin. The struggle can only be won in following Christ, through the paschal experience which will bring with it the taste of justice, peace and joy.<sup>384</sup> This paschal paradigm is also noted in the statement of the second Plenary Assembly (1978): “Our faith teaches us that ultimately the city of man and all of human history can be saved only by the Passion and the Rising again of Christ entering into our lives.”<sup>385</sup>

In the above text the paradigm of the paschal story, Christ’s journey into life through his passion and death, becomes a model to be imitated by the church. The church’s lot cannot be different from that of Christ; one must die in order to rise again.

In the fourth Plenary Assembly (1986) the bishops state that Christian spirituality “grows and matures in the midst of continuous tensions and struggles with the destructive powers of sin and its

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<sup>379</sup> TAC 5.2.3., FAPA 2, 293

<sup>380</sup> TAC 5.2.3., FAPA 2, 293.

<sup>381</sup> TAC 5.2.3., FAPA 2, 293

<sup>382</sup> TAC 5.2.5., FAPA 2, 294-295. The Federation also mention prophets as servants and witnesses of the truth whose voice can be discordant and disturbing in situations that accept and perhaps compromise with injustices and inequalities. By listening to God’s word and striving to be faithful to it they become witnesses to the truth. TAC, 5.1.4., FAPA 2, 289.

<sup>383</sup> BIRA IV/10, II 9, FAPA 1, 314

<sup>384</sup> BIRA IV/11, IV.9, FAPA 1, 319-320.

<sup>385</sup> FABC 2, 44, FAPA 1, 37.

consequences, of conflict and injustice.”<sup>386</sup> This growth happens “by being incarnated into the realities of the times... and of discerning in the Spirit those realities that lead to death and those that lead to life.”<sup>387</sup> In a similar vein, the Theological Advisory Committee (TAC), in their attempt to expound a ‘Theology of harmony’, regards situations of conflict and sinful relationships as God’s call to listen to what he is saying through these realities.<sup>388</sup> Therefore, constructing a theology of restoration of harmony is possible only with the involvement of those who experience these conflictual situations. This way of doing theology is yet another example of the FABC’s contextual theology, in which a solution to a problem or challenge is sought by “our own Christian way of reading and restoring”<sup>389</sup>, together with information arising from contextual situations themselves. Another result of this process is spiritual maturity.

The FABC documents often discuss sin and its healing in connection with harmony and its restoration. Sin breaks down the primordial, creation-initiated harmony. “It is selfishness and sin which disturbed the harmony of creation.”<sup>390</sup> This is an important theme to pay attention to. God’s original created order was essentially a blissful harmony. Sin disrupted this harmony. The centrality of harmony is extremely important to note here: sin is explained against the backdrop of harmony. In addition, the entirety of salvation history can be described as a process led by God to restore the original harmony. The Church’s mission has to be in service of this harmony; this means that the Church has to put on a harmonious face in order to testify to God’s primordial harmony and, ultimately, to God’s will. There is the idea here of the perfection of harmony at the end of time. This strong emphasis on harmony is best understood in terms of the FABC’s impetus to situate the Gospel in an Asian framework. It seems that more traditional ways of describing the solution to the problem of sin, such as the various western atonement theories or models, are generally not well accepted by the FABC. Perhaps they ‘taste’ too definitive and uncompromising to an eastern mind.<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>386</sup>FABC 4, 4.8.3., FAPA 1, 195.

<sup>387</sup>FABC 4, 4.8.3., FAPA 1, 195-196.

<sup>388</sup> “Situations of conflict and disharmony are not merely sinful relationships, or structures calling for healing and restoration according to our own Christian way of reading and restoring, but also realities revealing God’s Spirit at work amidst them.” TAC, 5.2., FAPA 2, 291.

<sup>389</sup> TAC, 5.2., FAPA 2, 291.

<sup>390</sup> BIRA IV/11, 8, FAPA 1, 319

<sup>391</sup>In Thailand I sometimes heard discussion about suitability of the usage of Christian symbols and art; e.g., the question of the crucifix. Generally, most Evangelical Protestants do not use a crucifix based on the argument that Jesus no longer hangs on the cross. However, some people have argued about the possible non-suitability in an Asian context of depicting the Redeemer and Liberator crucified, as it implies that this man must have been a sinner to have merited with a miserable death.

Another example of an Asian undertone to the question of sin is when the BIRA discusses sin in the context of harmony in relation to Buddhist soteriological notions of ignorance, egoism and craving.<sup>392</sup>

In the cultural and religious traditions of Asia, harmony is a characteristic of Reality that all of us are called to experience and realise. Though our ignorance and egoism, craving and sinfulness is often a cause of division and conflict, harmony as liberation and fullness, joy and peace, realisation and nirvana, remains a desired goal for our effort through life.<sup>393</sup>

The importance of the concept of harmony in the FABC's theology was discussed earlier in the present study. This concept also finds a place in connection with the FABC discussion of sin and combating sin. By employing the concept of harmony, the BIRA apparently intends to accommodate the whole of biblical salvation history to an Asian worldview in which harmony is employed as an overriding term.

The Office of Evangelization further discusses the importance of dialogue. The Office claims that it is an important factor which leads dialogue partners to inner purification and conversion. However, it needs to be done with docility and commitment to the Holy Spirit. This, in turn, effects a conversion to the Kingdom of God and enables the church to fulfil its evangelising mission more effectively.<sup>394</sup>

Here it is important to pay attention to the point that the Churches of Asia are seen as in need of purification and conversion which are to be achieved in dialogue between religions, which itself takes place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This dialogue will lead to growing commitment

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<sup>392</sup> The following quotation is taken from the text *Buddhists and Christians in Dialogue*. Thus, the choice of words reflecting Buddhist concepts is understandable here.

<sup>393</sup> BIRA V/2, 3.1, FAPA 2, 150-151.

<sup>394</sup> OE, Conclusions of the Theological Consultation, 45, FAPA 2, 203. Here the text relies partly on Pope John Paul II's Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (RM): "Dialogue leads to inner purification and conversion which, if pursued with docility to the Holy Spirit, will be spiritually fruitful." RM 56. Interestingly, this papal encyclical allows for an interpretation which extends the "purification and conversion" to all dialogue partners, not merely those of other religions or faith convictions. In most magisterial documents these specific terms are used in connection with non-Christian dialogue partners or their religions, as being in need of purification and fulfilment. The FABC-text explicitly contends that the Churches of Asia need to be purified of their sin; the encyclical calls for an open and respectful dialogue through which the Church seeks to uncover the seeds of the Word and the ray of truth which enlightens all [wo/]men. In this dialogue other religions are helpful and can stimulate the Church to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and working of the Spirit. This dialogue must be conducted in a manner which is free from prejudice, intolerance and misunderstanding. RM 56 concludes as follows: "Dialogue leads to inner purification and conversion which, if pursued with docility to the Holy Spirit, will be spiritually fruitful." Thus, in my understanding, the Pope John Paul II leaves the object of 'inner purification and conversion' open to different interpretations, whereas the FABC's document clearly states that 'the inner purification and total conversion' concerns both the Church and its dialogue partners.

to the Spirit and to the values of the Kingdom of God. This dialogue also has a bearing on the Church's mission in Asia, which, in turn, seeks to achieve a fuller communion with God and among different groups of people.<sup>395</sup> In this passage, sin is seen as something which disturbs the realisation of the values of the Kingdom of God and prevents communion with God and between people. In a word, sin harms communion and relationship between God and human beings and among human beings.

The FABC texts pair the aforementioned ignorance, egoism, craving, and sinfulness with conflicts and conflictual situations.<sup>396</sup> This signifies that Christian life and spirituality must be incarnated and rooted in contextual realities of Asia. This means that Asian contextual theology cannot be done merely with idyllic and idealistic thoughts about Asia, but amidst the realities of Asian life. The Asian Church also has to be open to the presence of the Spirit in conflicts. The Spirit calls the Church to heal and restore these situations, but also to discern the work of the Spirit in them.<sup>398</sup> This has consequences for doing theology in Asia, which, according to the theologians of the Federation, "cannot be formed solely within the categories of a traditional Christian theology, by reading Christian revelation and applying its principles to the conflictual situations in Asia. It has to be a reading and reflection of the realities themselves, along with other religious and cultural revelations, as well as of the messages continually emerging from the conflicts themselves."<sup>399</sup> Here again the bishops picture an emerging process of creating theology. God speaks through the whole gamut of life, even in the midst of conflicts and sinful situations which call for a response. "It has to be a theology from below, from among those living in such situations."<sup>400</sup>

In response to solving the conflictual situations of Asia, the bishops recommend resorting to those resources available in Asia, not imposing foreign structures. In the past, the Asian Churches have been able to play "a prophetic role of denouncing the various injustices and oppressions, as well as of announcing the values of the Reign of God."<sup>401</sup> However, based primarily on the Western theological traditions of the past, this mode of action of the Asian Churches has lacked potential and

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<sup>395</sup> "At the same time, the multifaceted dialogue among human groups, in whom the power of the Kingdom of God is at work, will eventually lead the Asian peoples to a fuller communion with God and among themselves, which is the ultimate goal of evangelisation." OE, Conclusions of the Theological Consultation, 46, FAPA 2, 203.

<sup>396</sup> BIRA V/2, 3.1., FAPA 2, 150-151.

<sup>398</sup> TAC, Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 5.2, FAPA 2, 291.

<sup>399</sup> TAC, Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 5.2., FAPA, 2, 291-292.

<sup>400</sup> TAC, Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 5.2., FAPA 2, 292. In a similar manner, "The challenges of the conflictual realities in our Asian situation call us Christians to a new spirituality or lifestyle that will enable us to be witnesses, messengers and mediators of harmony. It is based on the radical values of the Gospel and enriched further by similar insights and values from the other faiths and cultures of Asia." TAC, 5.1, FAPA 2, 286.

<sup>401</sup> TAC Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 5.2.1., FAPA 2, 292.

ability “for collaborative action with the Asian religio-cultural movements against conflicts.”<sup>402</sup>

This inability, according to the TAC, is primarily due to a worldview incompatible with Asia and the theological vision of the past. What is called for is a more organic approach, which is more compatible with Asian contextual situations. However, when the FABC discusses this particular theme, it should be noted that here that the FABC pays more attention to defects of Asia as well. In earlier discussions the emphasis fell more on the positive character of “Asianness”, which created a perception that Asia and “Asianness” represent almost solely positive and desirable aspects for the aims and purposes of the FABC’s theological enterprise.

In summary, the FABC acknowledges that the road to liberation, freedom from sin, reconciliation and harmony is not smooth; there are ‘bumps on the road’. Sin and conflicts disturb harmony, and keeping and restoring harmony demands a constant struggle and discerning the presence of the Spirit of God among them. A viable solution can be found if the Asian Church is firmly rooted in its own faith and sources of faith and theology. These sources consist of all three theological loci: Scripture, Tradition and Asian contextual realities. Discernment, restoration and purification are necessary in both the Church and the Asian context which, despite their goodness, contain sin, distortion and obscurity. The Asian pilgrim Church is an agent which is called to bring about this restoration and proclaim the arrival of the Kingdom of God and harmony according to God’s will. In this mission, the Asian Church acknowledges Asian cultures, religions and socio-political realities as dialogue partners and co-pilgrims.

Earlier in the present study, especially in its analysis of the FABC’s theology of religions, it was argued that the Asian bishops convincingly affirm the presence of the Logos/Word and the Spirit of God outside the boundaries of the Church. This observation suggests yet another important question: can we detect in the FABC documents the presence of the Spirit independent of the Word, the Christ and the Father? Moreover, is the Logos always the same person as the Son, the second person of the Trinity?

The presence of the Spirit outside the Church was explicitly affirmed at the Second Vatican Council.<sup>403</sup> In the post-conciliar era, especially during the pontificate of John Paul II, this particular

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<sup>402</sup> TAC, Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony 5.2., FAPA 2, 292.

<sup>403</sup> E.g. AG 4: “Doubtless, the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified.”; GS 22: “All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way.(31) For, since Christ died for all men,(32) and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.”



theme was specifically developed.<sup>404</sup> Regarding this question, one can ask: does the FABC have a coherent Trinitarian theology? This question serves as an interesting “testing ground” for the FABC’s contextual theology and its relation to Church’s doctrine of the Trinity. This will be the topic of the next subchapter.

#### 4.6. Logos, Christ, and the Spirit

In many instances the FABC speaks about the presence of Christ (or Logos) and the Spirit of God together. In order to understand this usage, we need to examine how the FABC relates Logos and Jesus Christ to one another. As discussed above, the FABC affirms the presence of the Logos, or at least the “germinative seeds” (*Logoi spermatikoi*) in creation and consequently in all the created world, even in the entire cosmos. The standard Catholic interpretation of the relationship between the Logos and Christ is that the Logos is always irreversibly bound to Jesus Christ, so no appearance of the Logos is possible which is not related to Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God.<sup>405</sup> This view would imply that he is the *culmen*, the fulfilment of God’s revelation, and that all holiness, knowledge of God and possible moral goodness reaches its completion in Christ. This view also seems to imply a fulfilment model, in which the Christian revelation purifies and perfects the natural revelation. The difference between creation and redemption is clearly preserved. Especially after the arrival of the Christian gospel, the validity of the other religions as vehicles of salvation will cease, or at least will be relativized.

I have discussed these themes earlier in the present study. The earlier discussion showed that the FABC does not subscribe to the standard fulfilment paradigm, in which the other religions and

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<sup>404</sup> Morali (2010, 134-136) enumerates three papal documents of John Paul II which elucidate the action of the Holy Spirit outside the confines of the Church: *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986), and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990).

<sup>405</sup> Ratzinger 1993, 18: “Jesus’ human nature has its beginning in time; the divine nature of the Logos is eternal. Both are so different, as creator and creature are different, and therefore are not exchangeable. Nevertheless, in the incarnation, the eternal Logos has so bound himself to Jesus such that the reversibility of the formulas results from his person. The Logos can no longer be thought of apart from his connection to the man Jesus. The Logos has drawn Jesus to himself and so united himself to him that they are only one person in the duality of natures. Whoever comes into contact with the Logos touches Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is more than the sacrament of the Logos. He is the Logos himself, who in the man Jesus is a historical subject.” In the same speech to the Asian Catholic bishops, Ratzinger also criticises Raimon Panikkar who said that Jesus is Christ but Christ is not (only) Jesus.

cultures at best can serve only as stepping stones to the fulfilment effected by the gospel. The Asian bishops regard the positive value of other religions as more than simply preparatory. They exist *de iure*, as willed by God. In them, the FABC sees at least traces of the Spirit and seeds of the Word. Consequently, these kinds of questions also bring to the fore matter pertaining to the relationships among the persons of the Trinity. Where does the FABC stand here, especially in their understanding of the relationship between the Logos and Jesus Christ on the one hand, and between the Spirit and Jesus Christ on the other?

A 1999 FIRA document develops this theme in the following manner: Jesus Christ is the Word of God, the Logos, but he and the Spirit can also be encountered outside of the specific Christian and biblical revelation. The document says: “While reading the sacred scriptures of the other religions we are touched by the enlightening presence of the divine Logos that we Christians have experienced in an embodied way in Jesus Christ. While encountering the lives of the believers of other religions we are moved by the vibrant power of the divine Spirit that we found revealed in Jesus Christ.”<sup>406</sup>

Jesus Christ is the Logos incarnate, but it seems that in the FABC’s view this divine Logos is not limited to the incarnate Jesus Christ. The Logos is also present in other religions, cultures and histories of people of other faiths. The Theological Advisory Commission affirms this position as they develop their Asian theological methodology: The Logos and the Spirit can also be found in the sacred scriptures of other religions.<sup>407</sup> Consequently, if the Logos and the Spirit are discernible there, there cannot be any doubt that the religions of the said scriptures also can mediate the presence of the Logos and the Spirit. Thus, they clearly are willed by God.

There is little doubt how the FABC has reached this theological position on the presence of the Word of God/seeds of the Word, or Logos, outside of Jesus Christ. The basing of their thought on the teaching of the Church’s Tradition, especially that of the Second Vatican Council, and their immersion in Asian contexts are the most likely ways the bishops reached their point of view. However, in their position the FABC seems to diverge from the teaching of the magisterium, which

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<sup>406</sup> FIRA II, 3.1., FAPA 3, 126.

<sup>407</sup> “People of other faiths consider their scriptures normative for them, providing guidelines for their faith experience, but we do not consider them “inspired” in the sense the Bible is considered inspired. We hold that these scriptures are also willed by God in his Providence. When we use the scriptures of other believers in our theology, we read them in the light of their faith and their discernment. However, our reading of these scriptures reflects a Christian perspective. But, insofar as we are heirs to this heritage, we recognize God’s presence in them, and guidance coming from them, and submit ourselves to him who guides all to salvation. Hence, for us the foundational writings of the Asian Experience of the Transcendent God are an important resource for theology.” TAC, Methodology 3.2.2., FAPA 3, 358.

is based on the fulfilment model. Or, as Cardinal Ratzinger describes that model as of conversion and as of an exodus and transformation: “Conversion does not destroy the religions and cultures but transforms them.”<sup>408</sup> Thus, cultures are capable of transformation, which is realised in Christ: that is, in the Christian faith. Other faiths, although not incompatible with the Christian message, are in need of transformation by grace. In the words of *Nostra aetate*, what is “True and holy in these religions” is not rejected. They reflect “a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men”. Nevertheless, the Church is certain that fullness of religious life is found in Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the life.<sup>409</sup> In this line of thought, other religions can be welcomed to enrich the ways of understanding and expressing the Christian faith, but the Christian faith still remains the absolute fulfilment of God’s revelation. Seeds of the Word/Logos point to this fulfilment. In the last analysis, in the opinion of the official magisterial teaching, other faith commitments have only a relative role.<sup>410</sup>

If there is a point of divergence on this issue between the FABC and the Church’s Magisterium, where exactly can it be located? In the FABC’s theology there is the view that the Logos also appears outside the boundaries of Christianity.<sup>411</sup> This is God’s universal salvific will which acknowledges “God’s saving will at work in many different ways in these religions.”<sup>412</sup> Hence, the FIRA document contends: “The diversity of the religions, we are convinced, belongs to [sic!] God’s plan of salvation.”<sup>413</sup> This question was already addressed above, but here a crucial question arises: is the Word and/or the Spirit always linked with Jesus Christ, or can we detect an understanding according to which the Word/Logos or the Spirit acts independently from the event

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<sup>408</sup> Ratzinger 1993, 16. He describes becoming Christian as an exodus which leads one into the people of God and its history: “Whoever joins the church must be aware that he is entering a cultural subject with its own historically developed and multitiered interculturality. One cannot become a Christian apart from a certain exodus, a break from one’s previous life in all its aspects. Faith is not a private way to God; it leads into the people of God and its history.” Ratzinger 1993, 10.

<sup>409</sup> Here the text of the Vatican II declaration *Nostra Aetate* 2 reflects the normative fulfilment paradigm of the Catholic Church: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.”

<sup>410</sup> Morali (2010, 135-142) argues that in John Paul II’s *Redemptoris Missio* there is always only one Spirit at work, whether in the Church or in a broader, more universal manner. It is also this same Spirit who sows the seeds of the Word present in customs and cultures preparing them for full maturity in Christ. Morali also discusses the purpose of *Dominus Iesus* in this regard; she cites an interview of then-Cardinal Ratzinger: “There was a desire to respond to the relativistic mentality (see DI 4), which tends to ignore “the fullness and definitiveness of the revelation of Jesus Christ” (DI 5-8); to distinguish the action of the Eternal Word, or to separate the last from the activity of the Holy Spirit, almost as if we were dealing with two different processes (DI 9-12).” Morali 2012, 138. This last point summarises the official interpretation of the *magisterium* as understood by Morali.

<sup>411</sup> FIRA II, 3.1., FAPA 3, 126.

<sup>412</sup> FIRA II, 3.1. FAPA 3, 126-127.

<sup>413</sup> BIRA II, 3.1., FAPA 3, 127.

of the Word which became incarnate in Jesus Christ?<sup>414</sup> It is true that the Logos has been incarnated in Jesus Christ, but the Logos can be experienced in a wider context as well. It is parallel with the view which acknowledges that salvation is accessible outside the boundaries of the Church. The Church celebrates the Paschal Mystery of Christ; it proclaims the gospel of Christ. In this, the Church is assured that full salvation and communion with God is mediated in the Church and through the Church. At the same time, however, the Church knows that God's salvific will is universal, and it explicitly recognises that other religions exist *de iure*, willed by God.

The Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC develops its Asian theology and discusses the presence and a "sense of the Sacred" in Asian cultures and religions. The OTC establishes a firm link between the Christ and the Spirit as they write: "... the Spirit is at work outside the visible Christian community and its work is mediated through these various traditions. The Christian will always see these mediations as being related in some way to Jesus Christ but he or she cannot deny them."<sup>415</sup> A key term here is "mediation". Other cultural and religious traditions (i.e., Asian contexts) are ways and channels of the mediation of the Spirit. But in light of the Christian revelation and understanding, the Church holds that these mediations are always related to Jesus Christ. Moreover, as noted above, while the bishops accept that the divine Logos and the Spirit are present in other religions, the bishops also understand that they are the very same Logos and the Spirit who are the two Persons of the Holy Trinity, not different or parallel *Logoi* or Spirits. By this, the FABC apparently accepts and recognises an inclusive view in which all "*Logophanies*" and Spirit-appearances are ultimately linked with and connected to the Triune God.

In terms of the existence of truth in the Christian revelation and outside of it, the FABC's analysis clearly affirms that the source of truth is the Triune God. The appearances of the divine Logos and

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<sup>414</sup>"Catholic theology states that only Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, is the universal mediator of salvation for the entire human family (GS 10; LG 8,14,28,49,60; RM 5). Any separation between the Word of God and Jesus Christ, between the salvific activity of the Word of God and Jesus, or even maintaining that there is an independent action of the Word of God as such, apart from the action of Jesus Christ the Word incarnate, is contrary to the church teaching (RM 6, DI 10)." Grezlak 2009, 253. Grezlak has written a convincing analysis of the "inclusive pluralism" of Jacques Dupuis. He argues that Dupuis manages to stay within an "orthodox" inclusivist paradigm and not slip into a "Logocentrism" or "pneumatocentrism" in which the actions of the Word of God or the Spirit tend to be separated from the event of Jesus Christ. In Logocentrism and pneumatocentrism these actions can come to be seen as autonomous and separate economies of salvation, independent and alternative ways of salvation. Grezlak maintains that Dupuis is not guilty of such separation. However, Dupuis seems to accept other religions as ways of salvation for their adherents and also as participated ways that derive their significance from the mediation of Jesus Christ. However, in Grezlak's opinion Dupuis ventures further than de Lubac, Danielou, von Balthasar, or Rahner; Dupuis insists on constitutive, not absolute, character of the Christ event. Grezlak 2009, 254-255.

<sup>415</sup> OTC Methodology, FAPA 3, 330-331.

the presence of the Spirit of God are sure and reliable sources of truth. The Church is founded for the purpose of the proclamation of truth and sent to testify to truth. But the Church is not the owner of truth and salvation; rather, the Church is a sign and sacrament of the universal salvation.<sup>416</sup> While admitting this special role of the Church, the Asian bishops also acknowledge that Asian contextual realities have an indispensable role in mediating and revealing truth for the Church as well. This is one important aspect of and rationale for the necessity of dialogue with the contextual realities of Asia. They contribute to a better and fuller understanding of truth, and also help the Church in its mission in incarnating truth in a more complete manner in Asia.

Thus it can be concluded that, regarding the relationship between the Logos and Jesus Christ, it appears that in the FABC's theology there is no separation between Logos and Jesus Christ. '*Logophanies*' always point to Christ, because there is no salvation except through Christ. The inner coherence of the doctrine of the Trinity in the FABC's theology does not seem to collapse: Logos and Christ are always the same divine person who became human in Jesus. Nevertheless, there is of course a temporal distinction between the pre-incarnate Logos and the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth. The FABC however does not support the notion that there are many possible "*Logoi*", of which Jesus is only one. "Seeds of the Word", pre-incarnation "*Logophanies*" are always connected with the Son, the second person of the Godhead who at the appointed time became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. "The incarnation of the Divine Logos in Jesus represents the radical self-insertion of the Divine into Human history."<sup>417</sup>

This view, however, does not make the Church absolute since salvation (and, consequently, Christ) is present outside the boundaries of the Church. Therefore, in order to be saved it is not necessary to become a member of the Church. The validity of other religions does not cease, even after the appearance of Jesus Christ. Their adherents are accepted as co-pilgrims journeying to the Kingdom of God. Hence, other religions can be regarded and embraced as parallel vehicles of salvation willed by God. However, they draw their salvific nature and character from the Logos/seeds of Logos and from the universal presence of the divine Spirit in them. This also means that the transformation initiated by the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has to do with them as well: "He [Jesus Christ] redeemed humankind through his passion and death on the cross. He

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<sup>416</sup> See, e.g., "The Church as the visible sign and sacrament of salvation." (OE, Conclusions of the Theological Consultation 49, FAPA 2, 204); "The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom." (OE, Conclusions of the Theological Consultation 31, FAPA 2, 200); "[T]he face of Jesus ... calling the Church community to be the sacrament...of the communion with God and humanity." (TAC, Asian Christian perspectives on harmony 4.6., FAPA 2, 280).

<sup>417</sup> FIRA II, 3.3., FAPA 3, 127.

transforms humankind and the whole cosmos through his resurrection and glorious Lordship. This transformation will be completed at the end of the time when he returns.”<sup>418</sup>

At present, Christ appears more as a kenotic Christ, in his humble and human form, but in the end he will be all in all. He is also the Transcendent One and the ultimate Truth sought in and through other religions. He is the supreme restorer of the primordial harmony inscribed in Asian religions and philosophies as well. He might be called by other names in other religions; he can also remain unnamed: the Mystery beyond mystery. In the end he will be as the cosmic Christ. This is the major paradigm of salvation in the FABC’s theology. This is also the primary truth claim made by the FABC’s theologians.

The Church knows the truth in Christ, but he can also be encountered elsewhere. The key term here is “universal”: the Logos and the Spirit are present universally, which means in a wider perspective than what the Church’s boundaries define. The Church is still the Pilgrim Church, on its way to the Kingdom of God and the fulfilment. Therefore, the presence of the divine Logos can be experienced in other faith systems and cultures, too. In them, the Logos can be understood, described and addressed in various ways. The Church, however, holds that all truth and goodness in other religions and cultures are the handiwork of the divine Logos and the Spirit. This means that, ontologically, there is only one divine Logos to whom the Church testifies.

Having ventured thus far, we now turn our attention to the FABC’s ecclesiology, which in our discussion is linked with Christology. Hence, we must discuss the question of what kind of faces of Jesus<sup>419</sup> the Asian Catholic Church should adopt and reflect in order to inculturate and incarnate the Church in a fuller and a more Asian-compatible way. These challenges lead us to a question: what are the Asian faces of the Asian Catholic Church? The next chapter will examine this question.

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<sup>418</sup> OTC Methodology, 4.1., FAPA 3, 365.

<sup>419</sup> The Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) of the FABC arranged a Colloquium on the “Asian Faces of Jesus” in 2004. (FAPA 4, 285-288)

## 5. The Local Church in Service of Asian Peoples

### 5.1. Searching for Asian Faces of Jesus

As has become evident, one perennial experience of the FABC since its beginning is that of the foreignness of the Christian faith in Asia. Consequently, the FABC has devoted much time and energy in seeking contextually applicable ways of presenting the faith in Asia. The present chapter examines how the FABC seeks to present Jesus in Asia; that is, what kind of “face” of Jesus should the Church present so as to diminish the foreign, mainly western, face of Jesus, i.e. foreignness of the Church? What does an incarnate, contextualised Jesus look like in Asia? In perusing the various FABC documents, one can easily see that during its more than 40-year existence, the Federation has devoted enormous time and effort to fulfil their mission in proclaiming the Christian message on their own continent. This approach can be presented as a process<sup>1</sup> which, typical for an inductive theological approach, starts from immersion in realities of everyday life, followed by discernment and analysis. Discovery of the seeds of the Word and the presence of the Spirit of God in Asian contextual realities was one result of the first phases of this cycle. A shared experience of the foreignness of the Church in Asia is another result. In order to overcome this foreignness, the Asian bishops then ask the questions: what kind of Jesus would serve best the Church in Asia? This is the theme of the present chapter.

The concept “face of Jesus” appears several times in the Federation documents. A rich theology unfolds as one studies this concept. It also has important ecclesiological significance: what kind of “face” should the Church in Asia adopt, in order to be able to serve in Asia in the best possible way? In 2004, the Office of Theological Concerns arranged a Colloquium on “the Asian Faces of Christ”. A text produced by the Colloquium<sup>2</sup> pays attention especially to the specific contextual realities of Asia: religious and cultural plurality, existing poverty and the minority status of Asian churches. These are typically Asian realities and hence different from those in the West. As such, they call for an Asian response. However, another important point should be emphasised here: the FABC mentions the “Asian psyche” which calls for an Asian approach to theology. What makes up this Asian psyche? Here the bishops interpret it as a character which seeks the way rather than the

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<sup>1</sup> The FABC also developed a specifically defined process, which they named the “Asian Integral Pastoral Approach” (AsIPA). This process will be discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> OTC, Colloquium on the “Asian Faces of Christ”, 2, FAPA 4, 286.

truth. When interpreting Jesus' words in the Gospel of John stating that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, the FABC seeks Asian ways of expressing the significance of Jesus. These ways tend to avoid extremes and absolute statements, and they are also it is built on the Asian psyche; the Asian way is one of integration and inclusion.<sup>3</sup>

This approach is further affirmed when the OTC characterises how Asians see reality: the Asian way emphasises an inductive and intuitive approach, holism, a preference for symbolic forms of expression, a contemplative dimension and the need to confront and respond to suffering and oppression.<sup>4</sup> These characteristics affect how Jesus is presented and proclaimed in Asian contexts. From here arises a specific methodology; again, contextual realities are described and taken as resource material as the FABC seeks to find an appropriate and applicable Asian face of Jesus. The aforementioned colloquium further explicated the conditions for an Asian face of Jesus in stating that what happens here is again a process that involves contextualisation of the existing Christological paradigms and also reconceptualization of the Christological paradigm in a specific cultural context: "The process of articulating the Asian faces of Christ involves, both a contextualization, that is, the application of existing Christological paradigms to different pastoral contexts and also reconceptualization, viz., the articulation of a Christological paradigm in a specific cultural context"<sup>5</sup> With this definition the colloquium does not envisage creating new Christological definitions, but rather the colloquium applies the teaching of the Church as various pastoral contexts demand and finds new concepts for articulating existing Christological paradigms in Asian contexts. The term "Asian face" obviously brings one salient theme of the FABC to mind again: "Asianness". In the area of Christology as well, the Asian bishops seek such theological, cultural and symbolic expressions that fit into the framework of Asianness and reflect and convey the true face of Jesus in Asia.

However, here the OTC again recognises the significance of the other two theological loci, Sacred Scripture and Tradition: "Nevertheless, in both instances, these articulations should always be in consonance with the Christological heritage of the Church and as embodied in Sacred Scripture and

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<sup>3</sup> "Giving the overriding value of harmony, Asian Christians will be looking for the ways to integrate the experiences of Asia, the experience of their own forebears and hence of their own psyche, into their Christian faith. The Asian way is one of integration and inclusion. Rather than saying "A is true, so B must be false", the Asian tends to say "A is true, and B is also true in some sense." This is not to say that truth is relative. There is but one Truth; but Truth is a Mystery which we approach reverently while we try to seek to understand its various aspects and dimensions." OTC, Methodology, FAPA 3, 331.

<sup>4</sup> OTC, Colloquium on the "Asian Faces of Christ", 2, FAPA 4, 287.

<sup>5</sup> OTC, Colloquium on the "Asian Faces of Christ", 2, FAPA 4, 287.



Tradition.”<sup>6</sup> Incarnation and inculturation of Jesus Christ in Asia, with an Asian face, has to fit into the framework of the genuine Catholic Tradition. A diversity of expressions does not destroy the unity of the Church. Asian Christology provides a model of an inculturated way of presenting the gospel in Asia.

It should also be noted that here the FABC wants to express the search for an Asian Jesus arising from the Asian psyche and contexts, not merely as something “non-Western”. On several occasions the FABC characterises the type of face of Jesus that they see as being compatible with Asian contexts. In the same document from the 2004 Colloquium, the following images surface: the relationship between Jesus and his Father, the Suffering Jesus as the one who is confronted with the reality of injustice, racism and casteism. Jesus as a Jewish person is also depicted as having his roots in Asia. Furthermore, the image of the servant Christ washing the feet of the disciples signifies a Christ with people and for people, denying all domination of power. Also, finding the face of Christ involves experiencing the heart of Christ. The faces of Christ also bring to mind millions of Asian poor and the plurality of religions and cultures.<sup>7</sup> In the FABC’s theology, the Asian faces of Jesus are rooted in the cultural, religious and social context<sup>8</sup> : contextual realities as identified by the FABC as *loci theologici*. If at some points it seems that the FABC quite uncritically embraces these realities as material for contextual theology, here they add that the “face of Jesus” constitutes a critique of these three contextual realities.<sup>9</sup> An important critique involves the need to look at Jesus from the perspective of the poor and to see Jesus in the poor and oppressed. A spiritual sensitivity is called for in order to recognise the face of Christ in the poor.<sup>10</sup> The Colloquium emphasises an inductive and intuitive approach, with particular sensitivity to the Asian psyche. Other methodological means that will help in discerning the Asian face of Jesus include a holistic approach, a preference for symbolic forms of expression, the dimension of contemplation and the need to confront and respond to suffering and oppression in daily life.”<sup>11</sup>

The document quoted above calls for having a “Third Look” at Jesus: “Above all, there is need for a “Third Look” at Jesus, both from the perspective of the poor and in the poor and oppressed, who constitute the majority of the people of Asia. It calls for spiritual sensitivity to see the face of Christ

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<sup>6</sup> OTC, Colloquium on the “Asian Faces of Christ”, 2, FAPA 4, 287.

<sup>7</sup> OTC, Colloquium on the “Asian Faces of Christ”, 2, FAPA 4, 287.

<sup>8</sup> OTC, Colloquium on the “Asian Faces of Christ”, 2, FAPA 4, 287.

<sup>9</sup> “The Asian faces of Jesus are rooted in one’s cultural, religious and social context; and, at the same time, constitute a critique of the same religious and cultural context.” OTC, Colloquium on the “Asian Faces of Christ”, 2, FAPA 4, 287.

<sup>10</sup> OTC, Colloquium on the “Asian Faces of Christ”, 2, FAPA 4, 287.

<sup>11</sup> OTC, Colloquium on the “Asian Faces of Christ”, 2, FAPA 4, 287.

in the poor in their diverse situations.”<sup>12</sup> The expression “Third Look” apparently articulates the need to look at Jesus, his life and work by and through the eyes of the poor peoples of Asia, which is a different view from the first and the second view. The meaning of the first is looking at Jesus through his own eyes, and the second through the way in which Greco-Roman and western eyes later looked at and understood Jesus.<sup>13</sup> Here the OTC suggests taking this third look, which means discerning Asian faces of Jesus in Asia’s cultural, religious and social context.<sup>14</sup> Hence, here we can see again an important and oft-repeated aspect of the FABC’s contextual theology: basing theological argumentation on important Asian contextual realities understood as resources for theology.

One obvious reason behind this thrust to create a Christology compatible with Asia is again an experienced foreignness of Christ in Asia. This concern has also been expressed by the Church’s magisterium. For example, the Special Synod of Bishops for Asia (the Asian Synod for short) convoked by Pope John Paul II and its result, the post-synodal Apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA)<sup>15</sup> address this question as well: “In the opinion of the Synod Fathers, the difficulty is compounded by the fact that Jesus is often perceived as foreign to Asia. It is paradoxical that most Asians tend to regard Jesus—born on Asian soil—as a Western rather than an Asian figure.”<sup>16</sup> Because of this, the pope urges theologians to develop an inculturated theology, especially in the area of Christology.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> OTC, Colloquium on the “Asian Faces of Christ”, 2, FAPA 4, 287.

<sup>13</sup> The term “Third Look at Jesus” was coined by the Filipino theologian Carlos Abesamis in his book *A Third Look at Jesus*. In Abesamis’ view, the first and the third looks are closed related; they are “first cousins” whereas the “second look”, the way which Greco-Roman and western eyes have regarded Jesus, is a distant relative to the first and the third look. The second look lasted from approximately 50 C.E. to the 1960s. Abesamis 2000, 1-2. Choan-Seng Song (1990, 26-27) calls for doing theology in particular contexts. This means to be able to see Christ differently than with western eyes. Christ can be seen through Chinese eyes, Japanese eyes, Asian eyes, African eyes, Latin American eyes. His book is entitled *Third-Eye Theology*. The concept of the “Third eye” is borrowed from certain eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism). It refers to a speculative invisible eye which provides perception beyond ordinary sight.

<sup>14</sup> OTC, Colloquium on the “Asian Faces of Christ”, FAPA 4, 2, 287.

<sup>15</sup> *Ecclesia in Asia* (hereafter EA) can be found here:

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_06111999\\_ecclesia-in-asia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia_en.html) (accessed January 21, 2013). The papal exhortation was issued in 1999 after the synod for Asian Bishops in Rome in 1998. Phan (2002, 1-10) describes the different phases of the synod: the first stage was the selection of the theme for synod in consultation with the Patriarchates, the Bishops’ Conferences, the heads of Vatican Offices of the Roman Curia, and the Union of the Superiors General. Their suggestions were then examined by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, which made recommendations to the pope for approval. In the second stage, the General Secretariat prepared an outline of the synod in a document called the *Lineamenta*, which was presented to the pope for approval. The *Lineamenta* was then sent to all the bishops for suggestions and comments. The bishops sent their reports to the General Secretariat. In the third phase the General Secretariat drafted another document called the *Instrumentum Laboris* (Working document) to be used as a guide for discussion during the synod.

<sup>16</sup> EA 20.

<sup>17</sup> EA 22.

How do the Asian bishops respond to this need which has been expressed in many ways? It should be noted that the FABC's starting point is to present Jesus not in an abstract theological way but rather in a contextual, comprehensible way. The FABC's Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs (FIRA) points to the following important aspects of the Asian Face of Jesus: Jesus is the divine Logos, whose incarnation represents a radical self-insertion of the Divine into human history. Moreover, Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God offers salvific meaning to all realms of life, especially for the poor and marginalised. Further on, the crucified Christ reveals God who suffers with us, especially with the poor and mother earth. Finally, in the risen Christ God reveals Godself as the Spirit who transforms our life.<sup>18</sup>

Presenting Jesus with an Asian face also implies using Asian cultural concepts, terms and symbols.<sup>19</sup> This leads to the question of what the Asian-compatible characteristics of an Asian Jesus are. What does the Asian Jesus look like?

One concrete answer to this question appears when the FABC's sixth Plenary Assembly (1995) depicts an image of Jesus which resonates with the Asian peoples' vision of life. This Jesus is a "man of creative Spirit, friend of God, person of interiority, bringer of harmony, lover of the poor, healer and liberator, bold prophet, suffering companion, victor over death, and sharer of his Spirit."<sup>20</sup> The contextual realities of Asia as identified by the FABC resonate in this description. It is noteworthy to see that the FABC is primarily interested in descriptive words: the passage uses several verbs to describe Jesus. He is depicted as a person who accompanies people in their lives. Ontological and precise theological expressions about the person of Jesus Christ do not occupy much space in the FABC's theology.<sup>21</sup> The theme of the FABC's 2006 Asian Mission Congress

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<sup>18</sup> FIRA II, 3.3., FAPA 3, 127.

<sup>19</sup> "Therefore we commit ourselves: To take every opportunity to make Jesus Christ and his message known in a way that is acceptable to Asians, presenting him to them with an "Asian face", using Asian cultural concepts, terms and symbols." Colloquium on Mission in Asia for the New Millennium, 2.1., FAPA 3, 206.

<sup>20</sup> FABC 6, 13.5., FAPA 2, 7. Other Asian-relevant Jesus-images proposed by the FABC include:

The suffering Christ; God of the victims; one willing to die for the other; Friend and Liberator of the poor; Builder of the Kingdom of God; the compassionate One; one who is gentle, forgiving, humble and self-giving and whose presence is healing; and Jesus as the centre of the Christian community. FIRA II, 4.1., FAPA 3, 130. Sugirtharajah (1993, xx) notes that even before Christians there were some Hindu theologians who were interested in Jesus and attempted to interpret him in Indian religious terms. Only later did there emerge Indian Christians who did the same.

<sup>21</sup> Küster (2001, 156) discusses Korean Minjung theology and notes that it has produced no explicit Christology. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ is implicitly the centre of gravity on which theological argumentation focuses. Küster also points out that Third World theologians typically link the generative themes of biblical stories with the generative themes of their own particular contexts. By doing this, they break open "narrowness in the Western theological tradition". The "option for the poor" is programmatic for liberation theologies. "The story of Jesus" is read against the background of experiences of poverty and oppression. In these theologies, the biblical material used is primarily the gospels. Küster observes: "By contrast, Paul has so far been marginalized in the contextual theologies. One can only speculate about the reasons. This may be connected with the literary genre of the epistolary literature of Paul's theological conceptuality, which seem at first to be a bar to narrative reception. Anyone who investigated what the

was “Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia.”<sup>22</sup> Here Jesus is presented as a “great Storyteller” who is akin to the great Asian wisdom teachers, but also something more: he is God’s love story in the flesh.<sup>23</sup>

It appears that the FABC’s contextual Christology, or “Jesuology”, is built on the Jesus who is encountered in the pages of the Gospel narratives. Another theological argument employed by the bishops involves the idea of “continuous incarnation”: Jesus Christ becomes flesh and bone and alive amidst Asian contextual realities. Here a “Third Look” takes place; the “story of Jesus” is interpreted by and through Asian contextual eyes, with special reference to and concern for Asian contextual realities. The bishops do not reject the Church’s traditional Christological definitions, but they reinterpret and reconceptualise them. The Asian bishops strive to present a Jesus who is not a stranger to the Asian continent.<sup>24</sup>

More images of Asian faces which the FABC sees as applicable in the context of Asia include: the kenotic Jesus who pitches his tent among us<sup>25</sup>, the one who forgives and reconciles and the one

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contextual theologies have to say, for example, as an explanation of the doctrine of justification would soon have to make a zero return.” Küster 2001, 15-186. With regard to the FABC’s theology, Küster’s point about the central themes of the importance of “telling the story of Jesus” and “option for the poor” occupy important places in the theological terminology of the Federation. Pauline letters are used especially when the bishops elaborate their cosmic Christology.

<sup>22</sup> Documents of the Congress, see FAPA 4, 273-281.

<sup>23</sup> Asian Mission Congress 2006, FAPA 4, 275. The appropriateness of the storyteller-image in Asia is also affirmed by Aloysius Pieris. He examines Asian religiosity, especially that of the Asian poor. Since the vast majority of the Asian people are poor, their religiosity, Pieris argues, should receive proper attention when thinking of how to present Christianity in Asia. In Pieris’ view, the religiosity of the Asian majority is cosmic, in contrast to so called metacosmic religions (such as Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims). Cosmic religions have a “this-worldly” spirituality: “The poor ... cry to heaven for their daily needs ...something to live on (food) something to live by (work), something to live in (shelter), something to live for (decent human setting) ... [These] colour their prayer life and their spirituality. ... Hence theirs is a God of rice and curry, God of shelter and clothing, God of marriage and children, in short the only God of this life, and, of course, the only god of their life. This total dependence on God is their spirituality.” Pieris 1993, 229. Pieris maintains that storytelling is the most powerful way of communication in the cosmic religiosity he describes. Salvation and liberation are actualised in a story of a God amongst his/her people. The world then becomes a sacred theatre.

<sup>24</sup> In this pursuit the Asian Catholic bishops are not alone. Volker Küster introduces different contextual interpretations of faces of Jesus in his book *Die vielen Gesichter Jesu Christi: Christologie interkulturell* (1999, in English *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ*, 2001). In the Asian context Küster presents the “Christ-centred humanism and syncretism of M. M. Thomas”, and the “Theocentric christology of Stanley Samartha” in the context of Hinduism. The work of Katsumi Takizawa and Seiichi Yagi represent Christology in the (Japanese) Buddhist context. Yet other Asian theologians are Kosuke Koyama, Choan-Seng Song, Ahn Byung-Mu (Minjung theology) and Arvind P. Nirmal (Dalit theology). All these theologians have developed their own distinctive Christological approach which they present as suitable for the Asian context. What seems to be common to all these is that Jesus Christ is interpreted “from below”, as the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth. Metaphysical Christological speculations do not occupy an important place in their theologies. The importance of Christology in new cultural and multireligious settings has been shown in great variety of books written on the topic. Among the most interesting books are *Asian Faces of Jesus* (edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah, 1993); *The Asian Jesus* (Michael Amaladoss, 2006); *Christ and the Tao* (Heup Young Kim, 2003); and *Christology in Cultural Perspective* (Colin J. D. Greene, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> TAC, 27, FAPA 2, 222.

who is the person of harmony and peace.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Jesus condemns slavery to mammon, greed and selfishness. “As a Master, he serves.”<sup>27</sup> “In Asia the face of Jesus as reconciliation and peace has a special appeal.”<sup>28</sup>

Terminologically, the expression “face” is significant. On the one hand, it implies that the FABC does not question the important metaphysical and Christological definitions produced by the Church throughout its history. The content of the Christian faith is unchangeable, but its outer appearance as presented in Asia earlier has been incompatible. This line of thought could be considered a kind of “kernel and husk” model, in which incarnation and inculturation have not succeeded as they should have. Changes only in the outer appearance will yield good results. In the last analysis, however, this approach does not seem to suffice for the Asian bishops. This was already noted earlier, when a new definition of the term “context” was introduced in a FABC document; context is no longer considered as a background for theology, but context or contextual realities constitute resources of theology (*loci theologici*).<sup>29</sup> Hence, when facing Asian contextual challenges, the Asian Church sets out to seek better and more Asian ways and faces of presenting Jesus in Asia. For this task, substantial material from Asian contexts is utilised. Therefore, a “Christology from below” is a strategy employed for the sake of the Church’s mission in Asia. The Church cannot represent truth in a reliable manner without assuming an Asian face. This implies, as stated in the text quoted above<sup>30</sup>, using Asian cultural concepts, terms and symbols. Thus, assuming an Asian face is more than putting on a mask. It extends deeper into the Asian cultural stratum.

In the FABC’s opinion, there are plenty of ways to present Jesus in a way compatible with Asia. The Theological Advisory Commission even maintains that “the human portrait of Jesus attracts the peoples of Asia, especially its suffering and marginalized masses.”<sup>31</sup> This assertion has significant ecclesiological consequences: “our community is being called upon to assume a truly human face: a Church that does not resist being incarnated in weak humanity; a Church that will not turn away from the crosses of history; a Church that does not hold back in emptying itself; a Church that dares to be the Church of the Poor. Through this Church, the face of Jesus who loves the poor with

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<sup>26</sup> TAC, 28, FAPA 2, 222.

<sup>27</sup> TAC, 31, FAPA 2, 223.

<sup>28</sup> TAC, 41, FAPA 2, 225.

<sup>29</sup> OTC Methodology, 3.1., FAPA 3, 356. See my discussion on pages 112-113.

<sup>30</sup> “Therefore we commit ourselves: To take every opportunity to make Jesus Christ and his message known in a way that is acceptable to Asians, presenting him to them with an “Asian face”, using Asian cultural concepts, terms and symbols.” Colloquium on Mission in Asia for the New Millennium, 2.1., FAPA 3, 206.

<sup>31</sup> TAC 40, FAPA 2, 224.

predilection will shine forth in Asia.”<sup>32</sup> The TAC explicitly identifies the face of Christ with the face of the Church in Asia: “And if the Master, so the disciple-community, the Church. Only when our words, actions, lifestyle flow from what we believe in Jesus can we invite people to “come and see”. The face of Jesus will attract the people of Asia in and through the face of the Church.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, for the Church, reflecting Jesus’ face in Asia means being disciples of the crucified Lord, which in turn signifies total and selfless love of God and neighbour. “The face of the Church must be the face of pure love, especially in the darkness of unloving.”<sup>34</sup> Here the Church is not hopeless, for it knows that the cross is also a symbol of the risen Christ. Therefore, the Church’s love ought to fill the world with joy, hope and optimism.<sup>35</sup> This is a new way of being Church in Asia and a fundamental perspective and option for the Church in Asia, despite its being a little flock on that continent. The Church brings a new face of Christ into the workings of Asian society.<sup>36</sup> In a similar manner, the TAC points out that the face of Jesus as reconciliation and peace calls the Church to be the sacrament of the communion with God and humanity.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere, the face of Jesus as reconciler of all things and all peoples is said by the bishops to be an appealing image to Asians.<sup>38</sup>

As the FABC seeks Asian faces of Jesus, Jesus is presented as he wanders on the roads of Galilee. How he proclaimed the Kingdom of God, how he approached the people of his own time: this is a paradigmatic model for the contemporary Church as it seeks to fulfil its own mission in Asia. The “from below” approach places more emphasis on how the incarnate Son of God, the Logos, exercised his ministry, and this “from below” approach becomes the central model for the Asian bishops’ Christological approach.

Earlier in this study I showed how the FABC argues for the goodness and the “graced” status of Asian contextual realities by identifying the presence of the divine Logos (or “germinative seeds, *logoi spermatikoi*) and the Spirit in them. The Asian bishops apparently went further than the typical interpretation of the intentions of Vatican II concerning the possibility of acknowledging the presence of the divine Logos (or the Spirit) in contextual realities. The Vatican II argument about the theology of the *Logos spermatikos* can be seen as a solid foundation for the fulfilment paradigm. As argued earlier in the present study, the FABC ventures a least one step further in their argumentation. Creation-bound goodness which is based on the presence of the Word serves as a

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<sup>32</sup> TAC 40, FAPA 2, 224-225.

<sup>33</sup> TAC 37, FAPA 2, 224.

<sup>34</sup> TAC 47, FAPA 2, 226.

<sup>35</sup> TAC 47, FAPA 2, 226.

<sup>36</sup> TAC 24, FAPA 2, 221.

<sup>37</sup> TAC 4.6., FAPA 2, 280.

<sup>38</sup> Third Asia-Oceania Biblical Congress 12, FAPA 4, 269.

theological foundation of these realities. They are not merely, or even primarily, stepping-stones into the Christian revelation. For example, in the area of Asian religions, the religions are sufficient vehicles of salvation as such. A strong Logos theology argues that it is the same Logos, who later at an appointed time became flesh in Jesus Christ and is now present in the life and proclamation of the Church, who was present in creation. Metaphysical assertions about the two natures of Jesus Christ are not of primary interest to the Asian Church. Quite clearly, the bishops do not deny them, but perhaps they are not the most important issues that the Asian bishops have to address as they attempt to present a Jesus compatible with Asia.<sup>39</sup>

In summary, as Asian Catholics search for Jesus' Asian faces, they understand this search as a process in which specific Asian expressions are used. These include: describing Jesus as the Way, a lover of the poor, healer and liberator, a person who accompanies people in their lives, among other expressions. Moreover, these expressions' clear objective is to present Jesus as a non-stranger in Asia. The FABC search for a Christological paradigm in Asian cultural contexts, a paradigm which will still be faithful to the Christological dogma of the Church but interpreted in a manner compatible with Asia. Here again an important guiding principle for the bishops seems to be Asianness, which surfaces time and again in the context of various themes discussed by the Asian bishops. Asianness as understood by the FABC also sets the framework for an Asian interpretation of Jesus.

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<sup>39</sup> Shorter (1999, 79-87) discusses the insufficiency of the "Christology from above" model in incarnational theology. Shorter argues that the analogy of the incarnation was first used in the context of "Christology from above", where it meant that the Son of God took human flesh and adopted a human culture. This means Jesus' own enculturation, his cultural education in his own culture. Jesus could not have fulfilled his earthy ministry if he had not adopted the cultural concepts, symbols and behaviour of his own time. These were necessary conditions for communication of the Gospel with his contemporaries. The same paradigm is a necessity for the Church as it continues Christ's mission. Despite its usefulness, however, Shorter sees inadequacies in the analogy of the incarnation model as a paradigm. It often represents a "Christology from above", which encourages a one-way inculturation and perhaps leads into enculturation, which can be seen as uncritical assumption of cultural forms. Instead of this model, Shorter, first of all, prefers the term inculturation. Moreover, the understanding of inculturation should be enlarged, he says, to include the entire Christian mystery, the life, death and resurrection of Christ and their consequences of human beings. This also involves critique of present cultural conditions; Jesus also was a stranger in his own culture. Shorter calls for a shift from an incarnation-bound approach to a Paschal mystery –approach. Shorter notes (1999, 83): "The Resurrection enabled Christ to transcend the physical limitations of an earthly life bounded by time, space and, of course, culture. The intercultural contacts of the earthly Jesus were necessary limited. After the Resurrection, Christ belonged to every culture at once. The Resurrection made it possible for him to identify explicitly with the cultures of every time and place, through the proclamation of the Gospel to every nation. The Resurrection made possible the release of the Spirit to people of every culture, and this was effectively symbolized by what happened at Pentecost--- The Paschal Mystery, then, is intimately linked to the inculturation process itself."

However, the identification of Jesus' Asian faces is not sufficient for the Church's task and mission in Asia. The next subchapter will discuss what consequences Jesus' Asian face are for the Church as a community sent to serve Asian peoples.

## **5.2. An Asian Church with an Asian Face of Jesus: What Kind of Community, what Kind of Mission?**

In terms of the Church's assuming an Asian face, there still seems to be much more to be done and achieved in order that the Church can fulfil its task of being an evangelising community in Asia. This question leads to basic challenges for ecclesiology: What kind of Church can best express and instantiate Jesus' Asian faces? What kind of face of Jesus should the Asian Catholic Church assume so that it becomes truly and genuinely local while remaining truly universal?

First of all, the FABC argues that assumption of a human and Christ-like face in Asia calls the Church to make structural changes: to rectify the image of power, pomp and authoritarianism which is contrary to the image of the Church of the poor and the Church of dialogue.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, and despite "many seeds of faith and hope"<sup>41</sup>, the Office of Evangelization (OE) admits that

...it still holds true that the Church is often giving a counter-witness to its evangelization with the poor, its lack of concrete involvement in interfaith dialogue and its lack of real interest in inculturation. In many cases the Church fails to raise a prophetic voice in matters of injustice because of her minority situation as a community... Lack of conviction seems to make the Church fearful of inculturation: proclamation still has little relevance reference to local culture, history and philosophy. We are still reluctant to study Asian languages, cultures and the arts. Often enough, the Church exculturates new converts from their own societies. In short there is a gap between the vision statements of FABC on the triple dialogue with the poor, with the cultures and with religions and everyday life of the Churches. The Church is an institution planted in Asia rather than an evangelising community of Asia.<sup>42</sup>

Another way of looking at the matter of the Church's assuming an Asian face is the FABC's expression "a new way of being Church." This is the theme repeatedly emphasised by the FABC, especially in the third and fifth Plenary Assemblies, in 1982 and 1990.<sup>43</sup> These assemblies call for

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<sup>40</sup> TAC 56, FAPA 2, 227-

<sup>41</sup> OE, Conclusions on Theological Consultation 15, FAPA 2, 196.

<sup>42</sup> OE, Conclusions on Theological Consultation 15, FAPA 2, 196.

<sup>43</sup> The third Plenary Assembly was held in Bangkok, Thailand, and the fifth in Bandung, Indonesia. The statements of the assemblies are in FAPA 1, 49-65 (The theme of the 3<sup>rd</sup> assembly was "The Church- A Community of Faith in Asia") and FAPA 1, 273-289 (The theme of the 5<sup>th</sup> assembly was "Journeying Together Toward the Third Millennium"). The expression "a new way of being Church" appears for example in the following documents: FABC 5 1.6., FAPA 1, 275;



creating a new or alternative ecclesiology; the third Plenary Assembly especially pays attention to the communal character of the Church: “The Church is at its deepest level a *communion (koinonia)* rooted in the life of the Trinity, and thus in its essential reality a sacrament (*mysterium et sacramentum*) of the loving self-communication of God and the graced response of redeemed mankind in faith, hope and love.”<sup>44</sup> The gathered bishops also identify inadequacies and failings in the Church’s current teachings and practices. For example, instead of exercising servanthood the practice of domination still persists among the authorities of the Church. Moreover, the structures of ecclesial organisation appear institutional rather than as communities.<sup>45</sup> The bishops see the need for a renewal in the spirit of the authentic ecclesiology of Vatican II.<sup>46</sup> Hence, the impetus and mandate for a renewal of ecclesiology at least partially comes from the Second Vatican Council. Here again, the FABC finds support in the Council for their programmatic thought, but the actual agenda and needs arise primarily from the Asian context: “Our theological vision must be turned ever more resolutely to the Church’s responsibility in the world, in the public spheres, in the construction of a more fully human future for Asian peoples.”<sup>47</sup>

If the 1982 Plenary Assembly was an important event, the significance of the fifth in 1990 is probably even larger. The fifth Plenary Assembly’s view of “a new way of being Church can be called as “a sort of Copernican revolution” which de-centres the Church and makes the Reign of God the centre of the Christian life.”<sup>48</sup> The emphasis here lies not in expanding the Church and its

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FABC 5, 8.0, FAPA 1, 287 (“A New Way of Being Church in the 1990s”); FABC 6, 3, FAPA 2, 3 (“A new way of being Church, a Church that is committed to becoming a community of communities and a credible sign of salvation and liberation.”); Asian Integral Pastoral Approach towards a New Way of Being Church in Asia (ASIPA), FAPA 2, 107-111; TAC, Being Church in Asia, FAPA 2, 221 (“a New Way of Being Church that brings new face of Christ into the workings of Asian society.”); FABC 7, B, FAPA 3, 5 (“In Asia we choose ...A renewal toward a profound and holistic spirituality and an interiority that mirrors our newness of life in the Spirit of Jesus, our new way of being Church.”); OHD, Colloquium on Church in Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century 4, FAPA 3, 33-34 (“... It has to be a methodology [methodology of a truly Asian theology] that bridges the gap between faith and life. It is this theology that will move us towards “A New Way of Being Church.”); Consultation on “Evangelization and Inculturation”, FAPA 3, 218 (“An inculturated Christian community, fully integrated in the life of the local human community will give rise to a new way of being Church in Asia.”).

<sup>44</sup> FABC 3, II, 7.2., FAPA 1, 56. Emphasis in original.

<sup>45</sup> FABC 3, III, 9.2.-9.3., FAPA 1, 57.

<sup>46</sup> FABC 3, 9.4., FAPA 1, 58. Komonchak 1999, 1, argues that “[i]t is a mistake ... to expect to find a fully, coherent, systematic, and comprehensive ecclesiology in the conciliar documents.” Avery Dulles’ *Models of the Church* (first published in 1974, re-published and expanded in 2002) is considered a classic on ecclesiology. He differentiates six models of the Church: The Church as institution, the Church as mystical communion (community), the Church as sacrament, the Church as herald (evangelization), the Church as servant, and the Church as community of disciples.

<sup>47</sup> FABC 3, 17.1., FAPA 1, 60.

<sup>48</sup> Phan 2003, 176. Phan also refers to John Paul II’s post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (17) which reads “Empowered by the Spirit to accomplish Christ’s salvation on earth, the Church is the seed of the Kingdom of God and she looks eagerly for its final coming. Her identity and mission are inseparable from the Kingdom of God which Jesus announced and inaugurated in all that he said and did, above all in his death and resurrection. The Spirit reminds the Church that she is not an end unto herself: in all that she is and all that she does, she exists to serve Christ and the

structures, but rather in being a sign and sacrament of the Kingdom of God of which the Church is a seed.<sup>49</sup> The plenary document of the assembly affirms this approach by asserting: “It [Church] is a leaven of transformation in this world and serves as a *prophetic sign* daring to point beyond this world to the ineffable Kingdom that is yet fully to come.”<sup>50</sup> This approach has an important bearing on the Church’s mission, in which the Asian bishops do not lose sight of the perennial importance of Christ: “The necessity for Christian mission [has] to keep *Christ at the center* of our proclamation, behaviour and relationships.”<sup>51</sup>

Because the FABC intends to keep Christ at the centre while at the same time accepting that the Church is not the sole possessor of salvation, we must ask how the Asian bishops see the role of the mission of the Church. When keeping in mind that the FABC explicitly acknowledge the salvific nature of other religions as willed by God, one can ask whether the Church’s *missio ad gentes* paradigm finds a place in the missionary thought of the Federation. A search of the various FABC documents does not yield one single answer. There are documents in which the FABC is certain of its missionary mandate; in these, the Federation is certain that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life and that sharing him with others is the ultimate reason for the Church’s pastoral activities.<sup>52</sup>

The existence of such statements in the FABC documents indicates that the Asian bishops are convinced that the Church cannot compromise its missionary task, which keeps Christ at the centre. Jesus is the most precious gift that the Church can give, and it is an indispensable task of the Church to proclaim this gift in a faithful way. However, as has been discussed above, the bishops acknowledge that the Church is not the sole possessor of the truth and possessor of the Kingdom.<sup>53</sup> The bishops resoundingly affirm that it is through Christ and in Christ that the Kingdom of God has come and is progressing to fulfilment.<sup>54</sup> The Church’s mission is to be in service of this coming of the Kingdom. But since the role of the Church is only related to the arrival of the Kingdom, and since other religions are accepted as contextual theological resources, is not the *missio ad gentes* a too-uncompromising paradigm? In the FABC’s texts there are several passages in which the Church

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salvation of the world.” Here the FABC clearly seems to follow the argumentation of the pope in emphasising the role of the Church and its as being inseparably related and connected to the Kingdom of God, and also in keeping Christ at the centre of the mission of the Church.

<sup>49</sup> “Our challenge is to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God: to promote justice, peace, love, compassion, equality and brotherhood in these Asian realities. In short, it is to work to make the Kingdom of God a reality.” FABC 5, 1.7., FAPA 1, 275.

<sup>50</sup> FABC 5, 8.1.4., FAPA 1, 288. Emphasis in original.

<sup>51</sup> FABC 5, 7.2.1., FAPA 1, 284. Emphasis in original.

<sup>52</sup> OE, Symposium, 4, FAPA 4, 250.

<sup>53</sup> “The coming of the Kingdom requires of us Christians a genuine conversion. We need to recognize first our failures; and we need to abandon our self-image as sole processors of the Kingdom.” BIRA IV/10, 9, FAPA 1, 314.

<sup>54</sup> BIRA IV/10, 8, FAPA 1, 314.

embraces followers of other religions as co-pilgrims making their way towards the Kingdom of God.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the FABC's primary approach to other religions and other contextual realities is dialogue. In this "triple dialogue", both the Church and its dialogue partners enrich one another. This process is "a pilgrimage where the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of justice, peace and love, is the end goal. Such a model is what the FABC has often referred to as a Church engaged in the triple dialogue: dialogue with the poor, the religions and the cultures of Asia."<sup>56</sup> This passage summarises that this way of being Church in Asia is suitable for the needs of the times and also to the summons of Vatican II. Interestingly, this approach seemingly challenges the *missio ad gentes* paradigm, as this paradigm is primarily based on the fulfilment model, according to which the Christian revelation perfects the good contained in other religions. Therefore it is no surprise that the FABC's stand on the issue has been the subject of discussion. There are theologians who contend that, instead of the *missio ad gentes* approach, the FABC's theology rather represents the *missio inter gentes* paradigm which indicates a new missionary paradigm.<sup>57</sup>

Based on an analysis on of all relevant documents, it is perhaps not possible to determine one sole approach of the FABC to this matter. This question again shows the provisional, tentative and

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<sup>55</sup> "Jesus in whom we experience the Way, the Truth and the Life invites us to follow him so that we may have life, life unto fullness. Our journey in the footsteps of Jesus motivates us to join the spiritual pilgrimage of sisters and brothers of Asian religions in pursuit of being one in Divine Life." FEISA 7.2.1., FAPA 2, 60. This acceptance of believers of other faiths as co-pilgrims is affirmed also in the statement of the 3<sup>rd</sup> plenary assembly: "...our Christian communities in Asia must listen to the Spirit at work in the many communities of believers who live and experience their own faith, who share and celebrate it in their own social, cultural and religious history, and that they (as communities of the Gospel) must accompany these others " in a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal..." FABC 3, 8.2., FAPA 1, 57.

<sup>56</sup> FIRA V, 10, FAPA 4, 199.

<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Yun-Ka Tan's dissertation is titled "*Missio ad gentes*" in Asia: A Comparative Study of the Missiology of John Paul II and the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC, 2002). Tan argues that the FABC is very much at home with the religious pluralism of Asia, and since FABC's approach from the beginning has been to seek ways of making the gospel and Asian local churches to be truly part of Asia's *Sitzen-im-Leben*, the neologism *missio inter gentes* would characterises the approach of the Asian bishops more aptly way than the old *ad gentes* paradigm. Tan 2002, 145-163. Tan has summarised his findings under the title *Missio inter gentes: Towards a New Paradigm in the Mission Theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* in FABC Papers No 109. In 2014a, 1, Tan notes that the term *missio inter gentes* was first proposed by William R. Burrows at the 2001 annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA): "Burrows proposed a shift in understanding from *missio ad gentes* (cf. Matt. 28:19) to *missio inter gentes* in his response to Indian Jesuit theologian Michael Amaladoss' plenary paper "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia" According to Burrows, "Christian mission in Asia is already primarily in the hands of Asians, and is better termed *missio inter gentes* than *missio ad gentes*." Mendoza 2008, 47, follows up the discussion and finds more nuances to the point. He refers to Tagle (2006, 5) [http://www.fabc.org/asian\\_mission\\_congress/docs/MISSION%20IN%20ASIA%20by%20Tagle.pdf](http://www.fabc.org/asian_mission_congress/docs/MISSION%20IN%20ASIA%20by%20Tagle.pdf), (accessed 24 July, 2014), who argues that the best way to describe FABC's mission theology is to hold both *missio ad gentes* and *missio inter gentes* together: "There can never be a genuine mission towards people without it being at the same time mission with people. And genuine mission with people encourages mission towards people. " One more aspect is found in Kadavil's dissertation (2006), where he argues that FABC's approach for mission theology of the FABC is *missio inter gentes* and *missio cum gentibus*. This latter would, perhaps correctly in view of the thinking of the FABC, emphasise a more positive role of the "nations", of the Asian contextual realities' in doing mission for the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

progressive character of the FABC's theology. In addition, the FABC's stance perhaps cannot be articulated simply by choosing a correct preposition, whether *ad*, *inter*, or something else. However, it appears that as long as the traditional *missio ad gentes* presupposes the fulfilment paradigm, then it can be said the FABC does not fully support that paradigm. An Asian interpretation is called for. Additional prepositions (*inter*, *cum*) may be necessary in order to complement the thinking of the Asian bishops. The Asian pilgrim Church still holds firmly to the missionary mandate given to it by Christ, but at the same time it welcomes and embraces other religions as co-pilgrims and co-workers for the advancement of the Kingdom of God. Thus, the Church does its mission *ad gentes inter gentes* and *cum gentibus*. This approach also fits in well with an Asian harmonious and complementary worldview and mindset that, as the analysis above has argued, are indispensable parameters for the way in which the FABC pursues its Asian contextual theology.

Having now analysed the ways in which the Asian bishops delineate what kind of faces of Jesus are compatible in Asia, and the missiological consequences of this view, certain methodological questions are bound to arise. What could be a theological methodology compatible with Asia that best serves the Church in Asia? On the basis of the analysis of the FABC documents in the present study, it can be said that the FABC's thrust to be as "Asian" as possible affects what kind of methodological solutions the FABC adopts. This question is the topic of the following subchapter.

### **5.3. A Theological Methodology Compatible with Asia**

As analysed above, the relationship between gospel and cultures is crucial for contextual theologies. The amount of pages devoted to this relationship in the FABC documents over the course of the existence of the Federation reveals that it has been a continuous challenge. This question primarily concerns the topic of inculturation, which was discussed extensively above in chapter 4.3.2 .

Different models of relating the Christian gospel and its contextual applications were introduced in the Introduction chapter of the present study. The analysis so far has argued that the most viable way of presenting and understanding the relationship between the universal and the local characteristics of the gospel in the FABC's theology is to view it as an emerging and evolving dialogical process and interplay among the Church's tradition and Asian contextual realities. This approach gives theology a dynamic character, which itself resembles the processive and pilgrim/wayfarer aspects of the FABC in which an Asian theology emerges in a process, along the way, and in dialogue among theological loci as identified by the Asian bishops.

However, in order to make this approach viable, a theological methodology compatible with Asia is necessary. In 2000, the Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC wrote an extensive treatment of the issue under the title “Methodology: Asian Christian Theology”.<sup>58</sup> In this document, the OTC sets itself the following tasks: “The purpose of this paper is to try to clarify what is happening and to show how it is rather a continuation of the tradition of the Church, a living tradition which today in Asia experiences an encounter with other Asian religious traditions and Asian cultures.---The purpose of this paper is not to define “An Asian method of Theology,” but rather to shed some light on the emerging theological methods used by Asian theologians.”<sup>59</sup>

The most important undergirding principles of the FABC’s theology have been discussed in previous chapters. Here I will concentrate on particular methodological choices the FABC makes in its attempt to fulfil the purposes set for its Asian theological methodology, especially in the OTC’s “Methodology”.<sup>60</sup>

One concrete way into practical methodology is called the pastoral cycle. Its phases are: a) an immersion into reality; b) an analysis of this experience; c) faith-reflection and discernment; and d) pastoral planning and action.<sup>61</sup> This method is also called ‘Asian Integral Pastoral Approach’ (AsIPA), which reflects the new way of being Church as enunciated by the Asian bishops, especially since the 1990 fifth Plenary Assembly in Bandung, Indonesia.<sup>62</sup> When the bishops introduce the method, it is first described as Asian, which takes into account the pluralism of Asian societies, the deep sense of God in the history of the Asian peoples and its great religious traditions. Second, AsIPA is integral with regard to content<sup>63</sup>, collaboration,<sup>64</sup> and co-ordination of structures at different levels.<sup>65</sup> Third, AsIPA is pastoral with regard to implementing the new way of being

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<sup>58</sup> FAPA 3, 329-419.

<sup>59</sup> OTC, Methodology, FAPA 3, 330, 332.

<sup>60</sup> The OTC document on methodology has been extensively used as reference material in the previous chapters of the present study. It discusses the FABC’s theological approach in a wider perspective: questions about pluralism vs. relativism, history of Christian theological methods, sources and resources of theology in Asian context (i.e. cultural, religious and social resources, hermeneutics, and the question of religious language). In the present chapter, material will partly be drawn from other documents.

<sup>61</sup> A Renewed Catechesis for Asia, FAPA 2, 31.

<sup>62</sup> A new way of being Church in Asia as presented by this Assembly consists of the Church’s being a communion of communities and a participatory Church. Further, it is a Church that faithfully and lovingly witnesses to the Risen Lord and a Church which is a haven for transformation and serves as a prophetic sign of the Kingdom that is yet to come in its fullness. FABC 5, 8, FAPA 1, 287-288

<sup>63</sup> Its content includes, among other things, standing against injustice, ecumenical interreligious dialogue, direct proclamation of the gospel, active participation of the laity, integrity of creation, and aiming at the creation of small Christian communities. AsIPA, FAPA 2, 109.

<sup>64</sup> Here are mentioned different pastoral agents: laity, religious, priests and bishops. AsIPA, FAPA 2, 109.

<sup>65</sup> AsIPA, FAPA 2, 109.

Church.<sup>66</sup> Finally, AsIPA is explained as an approach and a pastoral process, which will awake “the faithful at the grassroots level to discover their common mission and realise their social responsibility.”<sup>67</sup>

The methodology of the FABC is clearly typical for contextual theologies. Doing theology begins with the context: immersion in it and analysis of it. This approach is primarily, though not exclusively, inductive: contextual realities become important *loci theologici*. If the FABC’s scheme of different phases of AsIPA is to be understood in consecutive order, then the teaching of the Church, ‘faith reflection and discernment’, comes only after immersion into reality and its analysis. Thus, the deductive part of the theologising process takes place only after an immersion in and reflection of the material first gained from the local contexts. These two phases, immersion and analysis of the experience, then serve as important hermeneutic principles by which the Church’s teaching is reflected upon and applied, and the “data” gained from immersion and experience of it will in turn serve as the “raw material” of reflection and discernment. This reflection and discernment are done in light of the Church’s teaching, and it takes place in a local Christian community, the local Church which operates under the leadership of the bishop. However, the process is not complete after just “one round”; it needs to be done continuously, as the word ‘cycle’ indicates. The local Church has a pivotal role in the pastoral cycle. In the practice of the FABC, the integration of faith and culture is achieved primarily in a pastoral way rather than in a theoretical manner.<sup>68</sup> A practical and primarily pastoral approach to theology is arguably an Asian-compatible

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<sup>66</sup> This involves the participation of the entire community, and requires a new style of leadership which enables and animates in creating the vision of the “New Way of Being Church.” AsIPA, FAPA 2, 109.

<sup>67</sup> AsIPA, FAPA 2, 109. Examples of this approach are: Gospel sharing, which integrates the Word of God and life; the development of enabling leadership; spiritual formation for community leaders; involving people in decision making process, planning and implementation; ways of inculturation which integrate the Word and daily life and encourages dialogue with neighbours; and special social programmes. AsIPA, FAPA 2, 109-110. The pastoral cycle is also recommended as the FABC attempts to develop *A Renewed Catechesis for Asia Towards the Year 2000 and Beyond*, see FAPA 2, 31 on contextual catechesis as a means in this search for a new way of being Church in Asia.

<sup>68</sup> See e.g. Kroeger 2008a, 85. Aloysius Pieris has sought ways of expressing Jesus in Asia in a comprehensible manner in which Jesus ‘makes sense’ in Asia. He explores new Asian Christologies where the story of Jesus is retold by Asians and non-Christians as well. He mentions efforts in which the aim of the search was not an “ontological union” of God and humanity in Jesus but understanding Jesus as “the suffering servant of Truth.” (Gandhi). “Truth (God) triumphs through suffering endured by Jesus. The Hindu doctrine of renunciation allows the cross shine as the supreme locus of Jesus’ revelation of the divine. What was a scandal to the Jews and folly to the Greeks could be wisdom to a Hindu!” Pieris 1988, 64-65. In his book *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (pp. 127-128) Pieris presents the story of the Magi from the East (Matt. 2:1-12) in the form of three-act tragedy under the name “Asia’s Search for Christ”. The core of the drama is that the wise men from the East (Asia) do not need the wisdom of the West (represented by priests and leadership of Jerusalem) to proclaim Jesus in Asia. The religious leaders of Israel were not interested in going to pay homage to Jesus to Bethlehem along with the Magi. Therefore the Magi head home and bypass Jerusalem, the institutional centre of God’s people. Its leadership is not indispensable for proclaiming Jesus in Asia.

way of doing theology<sup>69</sup> and also in line with this study's general assessment of approach of Vatican II, which was seen to be primarily pastoral.

Another methodological approach concerning how to proclaim the gospel in an Asian-suitable and compatible manner was suggested by a 2002 joint ecumenical seminar arranged with the FABC and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA).<sup>70</sup> This method is here called a "double baptism", in accordance with the model of Jesus: the first baptism is his water baptism in the Jordan. The second is baptism by blood at Calvary. The first signifies Jesus' immersion into and acceptance of God's option for the poor, the second was Jesus's own immersion into the struggles and suffering of the poor.<sup>71</sup>

This 'double baptism' is seen as important in order for the Church to become genuinely meaningful for the peoples of Asia. The participants of the seminar reflect theologically on how the Church ought to respond to situations of dehumanization in societies. Jesus' ministry, therefore, reveals God's Kingdom, which brings liberation to all, but especially to the poor.<sup>72</sup> In reflection on the

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<sup>69</sup> Thangaraj (2008, 165) correctly pays attention to the significance of experience in Asian theological enterprises. This significance of experience is obvious in an important role of folk stories, hymns, poems and art as sources of theology and expressions of one's faith. He also refers to Hindu philosophical traditions, in which *anubhava* (experience) plays a significant part in epistemology. The FABC sees the importance of a narrative and symbolic theological language for supplementing the rational and conceptual formulation of the experience of God. TAC devotes several pages to this topic in their search for an Asian methodology, TAC 5.2.-54, FAPA 3, 408-419. Phan (2003, 102) notes: "In an *Asian theology* whose form and method are molded by and related the historical context of Asia, as distinct from a *theology in Asia* whose structure and style are not shaped by such a context, the Asian reality as described above, and not the Bible and/or tradition, is the starting point. Of course, theology, Asian and otherwise, is an intellectual activity, a critical reflection on Christian living. But it is, as Gustavo Gutiérrez has put it, a "second act" following upon the "first act," which is Christian praxis; it "rises only at sundown." (Emphasis in original). See also my earlier discussion of Pilarío's view on page 90.

<sup>70</sup> This particular seminar was entitled Second CCA-FABC Joint Ecumenical Formation (JEF II): Together in Cultivating a Culture of Peace (2002). FABC's representation was under Office of Ecumenical & Interreligious Affairs (OEIA).

<sup>71</sup> "We began by reflecting upon Jesus' double baptism: first, of water at the river Jordan, and then, of blood which culminated on Calvary. The Jordan baptism by John the Baptist was Jesus' immersion into God's cause expressed his fundamental option for the poor and proclaimed as the Reign of God among us. This is Good News mainly for the "nobodies" of the world: the outcast, lepers, sick, oppressed, women and children. The Jordan baptism was, thus, Jesus' immersion and acceptance of God's pact with the poor. The baptism at Calvary, on the other hand, was Jesus' own immersion into the struggles and suffering of the poor. It was, therefore, his struggle against all the dehumanising influences of his time, including the socio-religious and political structures which were oppressive to the common people. Through his healing ministry and meal or table-fellowship with all without distinction, Jesus revealed God's Kingdom as one concerned for the liberation of all, but especially the poor. Thus, Calvary was God's pact against Mammon, which is anyone, anything or any structure which undermines human beings and dehumanises them." OEIA 14, FAPA 4, 192-193

<sup>72</sup> Here the Federation takes this idea from Aloysius Pieris who suggests that in order to become truly Asian and meaningful for Asian peoples, the church has to receive a "double baptism in Asian religion and poverty". Jesus' baptism in Jordan is the example of the first: there he identified himself with the poor people of his time. Similarly, the Asian church has to be baptised in the liberative tradition of monks and peasants of Asia, let go of authority and sit at the feet of Asian gurus as a learning church. This second baptism Pieris calls "the Calvary of Asian poverty", which is the baptism of the cross. This is the basis of all Christian discipleship. Pieris 1988-45-50. "Harden not your heart; enter into the stream at the point where the religiousness of the Asian poor (represented by the masses) and the poverty of

approach of the “double baptism”, the seminar finds a paradigm of Jesus: Jesus grew in his understanding of the mission of God’s Kingdom, especially as he crossed over to the “other side” of the lake, to gentile lands. This led Jesus to realise that the horizon of the Kingdom of God lies beyond the house of Israel.<sup>73</sup>

This model contains an explicit challenge to Christians, who “are challenged to divest themselves of any prejudice or misconception about the “other” and to be ready to take risks in going to the core experience of other religious traditions.”<sup>74</sup>

The eighth Plenary Assembly adds one more dimension to the search for methodology: the understanding of cultures in greater depth. They are rich expressions of God's presence. Moreover, evangelising Asian cultures includes removing from them traditions, beliefs, customs, and practices that are not consonant with the divine plan as understood by the Christian faith. The Church also has to understand its own faith in light of the Spirit-given seeds of the Word in other religion and faith traditions. This process should result in a symbiosis in order that faith can be expressed, understood, and celebrated in the language and ethos of Asian cultures.<sup>75</sup>

However, the Asian bishops give a critical welcome to contextual realities as resources for theology. The bishops call for discernment and interpretation, and they emphasise that these realities serve as resources insofar as they embody and manifest the presence and action of God and his Spirit. Their acceptance is conditional. Recognition of the presence of God and God’s Spirit is a process whose primary agent is a local Church.<sup>76</sup> It is also a process in which Scripture, Tradition

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religious Asians (reflected in our monks) meet to form the ideal community of total sharing, the “religious socialism” that, like the early Christian communism, can be swallowed up in the jungle of Asian feudalism as well as Western ideologies and theologies.” Pieris 1988, 50.

<sup>73</sup> OIEA 16, FAPA 4, 193.

<sup>74</sup> OIEA 17, FAPA 4, 194. Bevans 2002, 54-69 examines the anthropological model as one representative of contextual theologies. According to Bevans, this model centres on the value and goodness of the human person. Human experience, although limited but realised in culture, social change and geographical and historical circumstances, is the basic judgement as to whether a particular contextual expression is genuine or not. A synonym for this model is the term “indigenization”. Bevans prefers the term “anthropological model” because this model focuses on the validity of the human as the place of divine revelation and as a source (locus) for theology as equal to the other two sources of Scripture and Tradition. Bevans contends that this model can run the risk of romanticising cultures. With regard to the FABC, their pursuit of making the gospel more accessible in the Asian continent by avoiding the argued past mistakes of Western forms of Christianity, their pursuit seems at times to be in danger of lapsing into an over-romanticised view of Asia and its cultures. Nonetheless, in all fairness it must also be acknowledged that the bishops also admit that there are as well serious defects in Asia and its cultures.

<sup>75</sup> FABC 8, 88, FAPA 4, 33-34.

<sup>76</sup> E.g. “[...] the construction of a genuinely Asian theological reflection must be given a special priority ... living contact with concrete Asian realities is necessary, and thus the collaboration of the entire local church, in dialogic process, is called for.” FABC 1, 33, FAPA 1, 17. In terms of inculturation, the FABC’s International Congress on Mission (CPW II, 6, FAPA 1, 138) posits that inculturation is “a creative embodiment of the Word in the local church.” The FABC Office of Evangelization (OE, Conclusions of Theological Consultation 20, FAPA 2, 197-198) argues that regarding dialogue with



and the contextual resources interact with one another. The OTC writes: “Context, or contextual realities, are considered resources of theology (*loci theologici*) together with the Christian sources of Scripture and Tradition.”<sup>77</sup>

After this discussion, it can be asked: in what way should the context affect the interpretation of Scripture and Tradition? What is the relationship between the two traditional sources of Scripture and the Tradition, and contextual realities? In their response to the challenge the bishops pose themselves, the bishops do not suggest that the Church alter or amend the Scripture, but rather that the Church seek ways of rereading and re-interpreting Scripture and Tradition by means of discernment and interpretation. Thus, the relationship between the different theological loci is not that of the fulfilment model, in which the first two loci effect purification and perfection of the “rays of truth” or good contained in Asian contextual realities. The positive value of the context is larger than that.

Another means of creating a methodology for Asian Christian theology is articulated by the Office of Theological Concerns when it suggests using experiential theological language employing “stories, allegories and parables”.<sup>78</sup> In the opinion of the OTC, a narrative discourse communicates the mystery of God in a contextually meaningful way. “In this way, one avoids understanding religious language simply as an expression of an objective reality (which is not denied) nor simply as a subjective experience (which would be fideistic).”<sup>79</sup> This, in the OTC’s view, is a hermeneutical approach suitable for Asian cultures. This kind of hermeneutical approach elicits participation and identification and leads to a personal experience of the mystery of God. Therefore, a theological language applicable to Asia is not simply an expression of an objective reality or simply a subjective experience, but an Eastern approach which tends to view everything in a non-dualistic way. “Whereas Western philosophy tends to be rationalistic, Eastern philosophy has a holistic approach to the Ultimate Reality. The worldview of Asians, therefore, is the way of holistic experience, the way of being, rather than that of thinking and rationalizing.”<sup>80</sup>

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cultures and religions, “the local Churches should be entrusted to announce the message of the Gospel in their own social and cultural idioms.”

<sup>77</sup> OTC, Methodology 3.1., FAPA 3, 356.

<sup>78</sup> “Experiential theological language takes the form of stories, allegories and parables. Such modes of discourse are not new. In fact, they are found in scripture where diverse literary genres such as myths, poetry, narratives, aesthetics, art and history are used to communicate the experience of the people of God.” OTC Methodology 5.1.4, FAPA 3, 407-408.

<sup>79</sup> OTC Methodology 5.1.4, FAPA 3, 408.

<sup>80</sup> OTC Methodology 5.1.1, FAPA 3, 408. This approach also affects the way in which “Christian truth” is to be mediated and communicated in Asia: “Hence, myths as religious imagination can effectively mediate the Transcendent, and are congenial to Asian cultures.” OTC Methodology 5.3.2., FAPA 3, 415.

The OTC argues that God remains a mystery. How then can we “express one’s experience of God in a way that can be communicated to others?”<sup>81</sup> The OTC continues: “Since we are finite, there is no direct way to speak about God who as the Transcendent is the wholly other.”<sup>82</sup> As a way forward, the Federation proposes an Asian approach called “symbolic theology”. This approach consists of the following dimensions and areas: theological language as a personal language; the analogical nature of theological language; an experiential approach to theological language; symbolic religious language; parabolic religious language; narrative religious language; and imaginative theology with its sub-dimensions myths, rituals, poetry and art.<sup>83</sup> The OTC elaborates upon these dimensions: (1) Theological language as a personal language means that this language as faith language cannot be purely objective nor subjective, but personal. It expresses a personal experience, not only a reality. Moreover, when speaking about God, we always speak in a relational manner; there is no direct way of speaking about God; who is “Transcendent and wholly other”. Therefore, this kind of discourse utilises anthropological language.<sup>84</sup> (2) Analogical nature of theological language: Human language is necessarily limited in its capacity to express God or the Transcendent. Therefore, language has to be metaphorical and analogical. Assertions about and concepts of God steer between the univocal and the equivocal. There is a sameness between the expressions and that which is expressed, but yet the difference is greater than the sameness.<sup>85</sup>

(3) Experiential approach to theological language: This approach uses stories, allegories and parables. This is the way of the Scriptures and of Jesus Christ. It also elicits participation, which then leads to a personal experience with God. In the OTC’s opinion, this approach is appropriate to doing theology because it is akin to Asian cultures in which everything is seen in a non-dualistic way.<sup>86</sup> This approach, however, does not reject the rational approach to God, which is necessary for preserving the unity and objectivity of theological language.

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<sup>81</sup> OTC, Methodology 5.1.1., FAPA 3, 406.

<sup>82</sup> OTC, Methodology 5.1.2., FAPA 3, 406.

<sup>83</sup> OTC, Methodology, FAPA 3, 406-418

<sup>84</sup> OTC, Methodology 5.1.2., FAPA 3, 406.

<sup>85</sup> OTC, Methodology 5.1.3, FAPA 3, 406-407. Here the OTC posits that analogical use of language can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle. This language has three phases: affirmation, negation and eminence. The OTC also quotes Fourth Lateran Council (1215) which declares: “Between the Creator and the creature there is to be noted a greater dissimilitude than a similitude.” The OTC also mentions critique of the analogical approach. It is said to be too rationalistic and restricted. The OTC then suggests a synthesis of analogical, empirical and functional approaches, which leads to an experiential approach to theology.

<sup>86</sup> “This hermeneutical approach is especially appropriate to an Asian way of doing theology as it has a greater affinity with Asian cultures. Whereas occidental philosophy tends to overemphasize a duality of the intellect and the will, transcendence and immanence, an Eastern approach tends to see everything in a non-dualistic way. Whereas Western philosophy tends to be rationalistic, Eastern philosophy has a holistic approach to the Ultimate Reality. The

(4) Symbolic religious language: Here the OTC argues that symbols genuinely bear the reality which they symbolise. They mediate an experience of the Transcendent. “Symbolic language seeks to mediate the meaning and existential truth of reality rather than conceptual truth ... By approaching theology via symbols, we are able to understand Asian cultures, languages, philosophies and religions better.... Asians know very well that God is better mediated through symbols which evoke in them a direct and personal experience rather than through an intellectual discourse, since the Mystery is beyond words.”<sup>87</sup>

(5) Parabolic religious language: Here OTC points out that the meaning of a parable lies in the parable itself. Parables, the OTC observes, are widely used in Asian religions.<sup>88</sup>

(6) Narrative religious language. Parabolic language is one part of the larger category of narrative discourse. In addition, narratives also elicit participation and effect transformation. Here the OTC does not wish to reject or devalue the importance of theological propositions and doctrines. However, they argue that they are not the primary way of expressing the truth of the mystery of God, since they cannot comprehend and encapsulate the fullness of truth. These expressions are open to yet fuller expressions of truth. The OTC explains that doctrines delimit and exclude what is false; symbolic and narrative religious discourse is needed as a complement to discursive and rational theology.<sup>89</sup>

(7) Imaginative theology: myths and rituals, poetry and art. Here the OTC argues that recovery of mystical language is needed so that theology can go beyond conceptual and propositional language about God. Here the OTC suggests a theology of religious imagination. In such a theology, poetry and other forms of art are effective ways of communicating the presence of God. In addition, myths and rituals are salient forms of religious imagination. Myths provide meaning for our human existence in relation to the Transcendent. Myths are related to parables in that they do not call for an interpretation. Rituals, in turn, mediate the experience of the Transcendent. Therefore, the liturgy of the Church must retain its ritual and sacramental character. Consequently, the OTC argues that sacramental spirituality should occupy an important place in the area of theology.<sup>90</sup>

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worldview of Asians, therefore, is the way of holistic experience, the way of being, rather than that of thinking and rationalizing.” OTC, Methodology 5.1.4., FAPA 3, 408.

<sup>87</sup> OTC, Methodology 5.2.1., FAPA 3, 410-411.

<sup>88</sup> OTC, Methodology 5.2.2., FAPA 3, 411.

<sup>89</sup> OTC, Methodology 5.2.3., FAPA 3, 412-413.

<sup>90</sup> OTC, Methodology 5.3., FAPA 3, 413-418.

All these areas are important especially because of the need to incarnate and inculturate faith: “Unless faith is incarnated and expressed accordingly in our cultures (as they exist today), it will remain alien to our people. Cultures, symbols and language, however, must be evolved gradually and not artificially imposed.”<sup>91</sup> In summary, the OTC’s treatise concludes with the thought that, despite the fact that all faith statements are symbolic, nevertheless they mediate the Transcendent because they are open to the Absolute Mystery. This is a very suitable approach in Asia, an approach which complements the spiritual and theological traditions of the West. Moreover, all the aforementioned characteristics of Asian symbolic theology appear to represent an Asian approach, that is, Asianness. The incarnation and inculturation of Christian faith in Asia have to take place within the framework of the paradigm which has surfaced time and again during this study and which certainly is one of the principal and foundational underpinnings of the FABC’s contextual theology: the impetus to become and be Asian, Asianness. This impetus is realised when the Church in Asia becomes the Church of Asia. In this respect, the FABC’s theological enterprise represents “a common sense of Asianness [which] has been emerging over the last fifty years. Perhaps this can be considered the most basic, if the most important, trend in Asian theology.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> OTC, Methodology 5.3., FAPA 3, 418.

<sup>92</sup> Amaldoss 2014, 104.

## **6. Conclusions: The Journey Continues**

For over forty years, the Asian pilgrim Church sojourned far in the midst of its contexts in Asia, and formulated its theology in the light of the Church's authentic tradition and Asian contextual realities. This study has sought to analyse and to establish a coherent picture of the parameters of the FABC's contextual theology created in the process of this theological and pastoral reflection and practice. In other words, the purpose and intention of the Asian Catholic bishops', as iterated in the documents of the FABC, has been to become a truly Asian Church while at the same time remaining a truly Catholic Church. The opening sentence of the present study articulated the FABC's intention for the Asian Catholic Church in terms of "finding one's own identity in order to have future in Asia." Thus, the present study has discussed the issues pertaining to the very identity of the Catholic Church in Asia. This purpose is expressed also in the title of the study: "Towards a truly Asian and a truly Catholic Church."

We come now to the task of drawing conclusions about how the Asian bishops managed in the task they set themselves at the time of the establishment of the FABC. It is important to note that this is not a final, conclusive evaluation of the theology of the FABC. The Federation is a living organisation which keeps developing its theology in the midst of changing Asian contexts. Rather, it is my purpose to suggest observations on the question of what kind of process has evolved as the FABC has discussed a variety of central themes in their effort to become truly Asian while remaining truly Catholic. The questions we will ask are: Where have the Asian Catholic bishops ventured so far? What has guided them, what are the biggest challenges and what kind of solutions has the FABC proposed?

The present study has unfolded as a process of examining the most significant aspects of the FABC. Structurally and methodologically, the study has followed the order of the FABC itself. That is, the exploration of the theological development of the Federation began with the analysis of the context and landscape in which the Asian Catholic Church lives. This approach itself is frequently present in various documents of the FABC. Therefore, this approach provides a kind of road map for discussing and analysing the contextual theology of the FABC.

The first topics analysed were the concepts of "being Asian" and "Asianness" as described and understood by the FABC. It was shown that the Asian bishops predominantly "Asia" and "Asianness" in a positive light. For the FABC, the ideas of Asia and Asianness constitute a framework in which the Catholic Church in Asia and its theology must immerse themselves in order

to become more firmly rooted in Asian soil. Thus, the FABC argues that there indeed exists an Asianness which can be discovered and towards which the Church can, and should, move. Therefore, Asianness should be a hallmark of the Asian Church.

“Becoming truly Asian” (in the phrase used in FABC documents) implies that the expected change, the becoming, should take place primarily in the Church (“becoming truly Asian”) rather than in the contexts in which the Church lives. In this view, the Asian bishops appear to subscribe to a specific kind of Asian essentialism, which creates and upholds a large category of its own by generalizing a vast number of different cultural, religious and socio-political realities under one category: Asianness. Moreover, the present study has argued that on many occasions the FABC has assessed Asia and Asianness quite uncritically and even idealistically. The present study also noted that previous studies of the theology of the FABC have paid some attention to the possible essentialism of Asianness as it appears in the FABC documents. However, to date a detailed and thorough analysis of the concept has been lacking.

Thus, on this point the present study raised critical questions: As the FABC describes it, Asianness seems to represent a counterpole to Westernness, and as such it is a very large concept. We can perhaps ask how coherent a theology is whose primary argument consist of a large and undefined blanket term and which is described in terms of a negative (Asian=non-Western)? Moreover, we can also ask if, in its predominantly positive assessment of Asianness (including Asian cultures and contexts), the FABC is at risk of neglecting “the foolishness of the cross” (1. Cor.10) i.e., the countercultural character of the Gospel? In their discussion of becoming Asian, the Asian bishops do not provide a significant critical assessment of Asia and its cultural phenomena especially with regard their possible distortion and defects.

From a theological perspective, when the FABC perceive Asian cultures and contexts as inherently good, the distinction between nature and grace in the FABC’s theology becomes blurred. Following here the categorisation of Stephen Bevans, we can ask if the FABC, when it discusses Asianness, the FABC subscribes to the anthropological model of theology, in which a major danger “is that it easily falls prey to a cultural romanticism.”<sup>1</sup> This kind of approach may also run the risk of undermining the universal, Catholic dimension of the Christian faith. Is this true of the FABC?

With regard to the FABC, their perhaps somewhat essentialist and even idealistic goal to become truly Asian can also be understood as a genuine attempt to shrug off the vestiges of the colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Bevans 2002, 60.

heritage which the FABC see as still lingering in the theology, practices and organizational structures of the Church. As such, the FABC identifies “Asianness” as a corrective to “Westernness.” The bishops see becoming Asian as a prerequisite for successful inculturation of the Gospel in Asia. Westernness has not helped the Church in Asia to become rooted in Asian soil: rather, the results of the Westernness and the Western faces of the Church in Asia have been counterproductive. In addition, in the opinion of the FABC, these “Western vestiges” are seen as products of a worldview and mindset foreign to Asian peoples. As such, Westernness has proven to be unsuccessful for the Church’s mission in Asia, which is shown in the minority status of the Church in the most parts of Asia. In addition, the Christian faith in Asia is by and large considered as a “white man’s religion”. The Asian bishops see these realities as a serious obstacle to the Asian Church’s becoming truly Asian. In the opinion of the Asian Catholic bishops, the Church and the Gospel have not become genuinely inculturated in Asia.

In addition, the present study argues that in its pursuit towards Asianness, the FABC belongs to a larger theological trend of emerging Asianness, which obviously is a broad generalization for the attempts to create contextual theologies. In terms of its approach, the theology of the FABC appears to find its place within the large category of postcolonial contextual theologies. The present study has also argued that, despite the fact that “Asia” is for all intents and purposes a geographical notion only, the Asian Catholic bishops nonetheless believe that a common sense of Asianness can be found and that a solid contextual theology compatible with Asia can be constructed.

Thus, as we come to the present stage of the FABC’s theological journey, we can propose two observations. First, that the FABC’s understanding of Asianness represents a certain kind of terminological essentialism. At the same time, however, Asianness in the theology of the FABC can also be understood and interpreted as the existence of a plurality of cultural and other contextual realities with which the Catholic Church in Asia as a minority Church (in the most part of Asia) has to live. This second perspective provides a positive tone for the concept Asianness. This positive inclination towards Asianness is also reflected in the words of Ruben Mendoza in his discussion of the meaning of Asian/Asianness in the FABC documents: “[A] particular concept, value or practice is Asian as long as it is expressive of the culture and rooted in the lives of a particular people of Asia”<sup>2</sup> This obviously correct definition establishes a wide framework within which the FABC seeks to develop its theology. Thus, it does not seem fair to claim that the FABC’s discussion of Asianness *in toto* represents an unspecified essentialism as a mere counterpole to the

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<sup>2</sup> Mendoza 2008, 20 n. 45.

West/Westernness.

As already noted, the FABC is not the sole representative of the emerging Asianness in the Catholic Church; “Asia” and “Asian values” were also important guidelines in Pope John Paul II’s post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, in whose drafting process Asian Catholic bishops played an important role. It is therefore possible that the emphasis placed on Asianness in the papal document is a contribution of the Asian bishops. But the presence of the concept of Asianness in the exhortation indicates that the Church’s magisterium accepts as well the existence of specific Asian values and worldview which can be placed legitimately under the somewhat questionable rubric of “Asianness.” Thus, it seems to be correct to understand Asianness as a serious effort of the FABC to incarnate and inculturate the Gospel in Asia. This seriousness is also visible in the ways how the FABC discusses Asianness in a more detailed manner, as the bishops discuss various of its components.

The most important component of Asianness the FABC documents discuss is harmony. In the opinion of the FABC, the Church can best communicate the Gospel in Asia in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. The bishops argue that this is a way which is faithful to the Church’s Tradition, and faithful to the Asian soul. The Asian bishops see harmony as a common denominator among various Asian philosophies and religions. A Asian harmonious vision avoids confrontation and exclusivism. Consequently, the FABC interprets the Gospel and all of biblical history in the framework of harmony. The intention of doing so is to show that the Gospel contains nothing inherently non-Asian. An Asian, harmonious way can accommodate the Christian message within its own framework. In this particular manner of reading the Scripture, an Asian harmonious approach becomes a hermeneutical principle for interpreting the Scripture. Arguing that harmony is a major theme of Christianity and that it expresses the total sum of salvation offered in Jesus Christ, the FABC appears to intend to present the Gospel in a manner compatible with an Asian worldview and make the Gospel “feel at home” in Asia. A reading of Scripture through the hermeneutical lens of harmony can therefore be seen as a way for the Church to become truly Asian.

A harmonious Asianness is also an important framework for discussing the question of truth. The present study argues that an Asian worldview and Asianness, contributes significantly to the understanding of truth in the FABC documents. Especially in its early years, the FABC subscribed to the understanding that the Church is the holder and proclaimer of “immutable and immortal truths”. Therefore, this expression emphasises the universality and supracultural character of the



Gospel. In this view, the local Church is at one with the universal Church. This universality only becomes visible and actualised in the local, but the emphasis still lies on the universality of the Church and of its message. However, in the later FABC documents the emphasis moves more to the local nature of the Church. This change began to take place especially through the involvement and dialogue with Asian contextual realities: the cultures, religions and socio-political realities of Asia. This involvement indicates that in this approach the primary theological approach is inductive: the Church learns from the contextual realities of Asia, and in this learning process the Church also learns what God is saying to the churches. This emphasis on praxis also illustrates that the understanding of truth is not “carved in stone.” There is always room for a better comprehension of truth toward which Asian contextual realities significantly contribute. In the opinion of the FABC, truth is not merely, or even primarily, a theoretical matter. The FABC’s Office of Evangelisation puts it in this way: “Doing the truth comes before the formulation of doctrine.”<sup>3</sup>

While confessing that Jesus is the unique Saviour of the world and the Way, the Truth and the Life, the FABC at the same time acknowledges that the Church can also learn from Asian contextual realities. In its approach the FABC clearly wants to avoid exclusivist expressions, which the FABC understands as an obstacle to harmony and an Asian complementary way of perceiving the world. Rather, the FABC emphasises an understanding which makes way for the possibility of seeing beauty and truth in others. In the FABC sources this approach is also called “the Asian *yin-yang*,” which promotes unity in diversity and accepts plurality of expressions in theology as well. No expression is perfect; there is always room for additional expressions which can help in gaining a better understanding. In the field of theology, this plurality is even desirable since in theology we deal with a mystery which is beyond our comprehension. A fuller understanding of that mystery benefits from a plurality of expressions. Thus, also in its interpretation of truth the FABC clearly intends to express it within the framework of being Asian and Asianness. This observation is yet another building block in the hypothesis that Asianness constitutes a major interpretative category for the Asian bishops’ effort to identify the proper identity for Asian Catholic Churches.

The present study also examined the question of what the FABC’s, and of the Christian revelation’s, special contribution for the search of truth is. The Office for Theological Concerns (OTC) of the FABC introduces the concept of “Wayfaring Theology” as an authentic Catholic articulation of faith and continuation of Catholic tradition. At the same time, the OTC argues that the dimension of “wayfaring” is present in and compatible with Asia and Asian theology. With

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<sup>3</sup> OE Theological Consultation 52, FAPA 2, 205.

respect to theology, this dimension means that truth is revealed and understood more fully as the Church journeys forward. This “wayfaring” dimension reflects the Asian Catholic bishops’ drive and intention to become as Asian a Church as possible by reaching out to their fellow Asians as much as possible. This reaching out is based on the mission that Jesus Christ entrusted to his Church. But as the concept of “wayfaring” tells, the FABC acknowledges that their Asian theological enterprise is an unfinished product. Thus, the FABC calls their process a pilgrimage during which the Church, in dialogue with Asian contextual realities, grows in its understanding of truth.

The analysis in the present study of the concept of truth in the FABC documents indicated that a tension exists in the thought of the FABC bishops. On the one hand, the bishops firmly affirm that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life and that the Church’s mission is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. The bishops understand Jesus Christ as the unique Saviour of the world in whom the deepest yearnings of the Asian hearts are fulfilled. But, on the other hand, the FABC also attempts to avoid exclusive statements in which adherents of other faiths are judged or condemned. The solution of the Asian Catholic bishops is a dialogical approach, which embraces Asian contextual realities as contributors to the search for a fuller understanding of truth. In the words of the Office for Theological Concerns, “All ... different ways of perceiving the one truth of reality enable us to comprehend that reality in a fuller, richer manner than if we had only one way to perceive it.” Thus, in the final analysis, the overriding principle of keeping the universal and local dimensions of the Christian faith and Church in balance appears to be an “Asian” approach, in which harmony, complementarity, inclusivity and an Asian concept of *yin-yang* constitute the major principles. The Asian pilgrim, the wayfarer Church, grows in its comprehension of truth.

Another supportive hermeneutical key for understanding the theological process of the FABC as representing a truly Catholic interpretation is the statement which argues that the theology of the FABC belongs to “the great flowering of theological thinking [which] is rather a continuation of the tradition of the Church, a living tradition which today in Asia experiences an encounter with other Asian religious traditions and Asian cultures.”<sup>4</sup> This statement demonstrates that the FABC does not view their theological process as representing a breakage in the Church’s authentic tradition. Rather, it is only a living continuation of it. The Asian bishops support their argument by contending that the “flowering of theological thinking” is a fruit of the Second Vatican Council. Thus, James Kroegeer certainly interprets the FABC’s own intention correctly when he describes the

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<sup>4</sup> OTC Methodology, FAPA 3, 330.

FABC as “Asia’s continuing Vatican II”<sup>5</sup>. The Asian Catholic bishops clearly understand that their drive to become truly Asian does not contradict the intention of Vatican II, but rather vice-versa: the FABC as Asia’s continuing Vatican II makes an Asian interpretation of the Christian faith possible. Thus, Vatican II’s contribution and its reception in Asia are essential conditions for Asia’s Catholic Church as it seeks to find its own identity in Asia.

Nevertheless, despite their firm conviction that they represent a genuine continuation of the Catholic tradition, the Asian bishops’ goal to become truly Asian at certain points challenges the understanding and teaching of the Magisterium of the Church. This challenge can be observed especially in the case with regard to the question about the possible salvific role of other religions. While the Catholic Church no longer teaches according to the dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, the crucial question now has to do with how much goodness and perhaps salvific value the other religions contain. The present study analysed the FABC stand on the other religions and concluded that the FABC views them not merely as existing and accepted by God (*de facto*), but also as willed by God (*de iure*).

An unavoidable question which rises from this statement of the FABC is: what is the role and function of those religions after the arrival of the Gospel and Christian faith? The FABC argues that the other religions retain their salvific value even after the Christian message has been proclaimed. As such, they constitute a parallel way to God and salvation. However, by accepting the salvific value of the other religions, the FABC does not agree with pluralism as a position of theology of religions by claiming that all religions understand ultimate reality in same way. Rather, the FABC accepts and respects the distinctiveness of each religion.

However, when engaged in comparative theology with and of other religions, the FABC identifies some common ground among religions. The most significant common area is found in spirituality and in the idea that a religion is a way, a pilgrimage towards Mystery and towards a better understanding and realisation of truth. The relationship between Christianity and other religions should be a dialogical relationship in which the religions enrich each other. Therefore, also in this approach the Church is both a receiver and a giver, and the Church also welcomes the adherents of other religions as co-pilgrims on the same way towards the Kingdom of God. With respect to the FABC’s position concerning the theological concept of “fulfilment” in the relationship between Christianity and other religions, this study argued that the FABC’s position can be termed “dialogical fulfilment,” which means that religions indeed can, and should, enrich one another in

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<sup>5</sup> Kroeger 2008 b, Introduction.

dialogical relationship. The benefit for the Church of this kind of relationship is that its comprehension of truth increases. A theological argument for this understanding is the FABC's understanding of the presence of the Spirit outside of the boundaries of the Church. In addition, the FABC acknowledges the presence of the *Logos spermatikos/Logoi spermatikoi* in other religions of Asia. The term *Logos spermatikos/Logoi spermatikoi* seem to be a *terminus technicus* in the theology of the FABC. The concept builds bridges between the Gospel and Asian contextual realities. The presence of the Logos or its seeds is a significant factor in helping to see the positive role of Asian contexts. This presence also helps the Asian bishops to accept contextual realities as *loci theologici* together with the Christian sources of Scripture and Tradition. In their reception of the positive contribution of Asian contextual realities, the Asian bishops venture as far as embracing them as being nearly on a par with the traditional *loci theologici* (Scripture and Tradition) "in so far as they embody and manifest the presence of God and his Spirit."<sup>6</sup> Thus, contextual realities become the third theological locus in the FABC's theological vision. As they accept this positive assessment, the FABC is well aware that this position poses a great challenge in theological methodology, and this challenge calls for criteria. The FABC's solution is discernment in light of the specific Christian revelation, the Bible and Tradition. The last two loci are constitutive in this process of discernment, but they are not exclusive. They are not merely a background against which God's salvific plan takes place, but they also become a venue in and through God reveals Godself. This thinking makes it possible to accept God's presence in the sacred scriptures of other religions, although the FABC does not go as far as to call them "inspired" in the same sense in which the Bible is inspired. The significance of the other sacred scriptures is similar to that of other religions. They can also enrich the Christian understanding of God's action throughout history and in other religions.

In addition, the Asian bishops affirm the presence of the Word of God in Asian contextual realities, together with the presence of the Spirit of God. The Asian bishops explicitly and repeatedly affirm that the Spirit of the God is also present and can be encountered outside the Christian dispensation. In this view the FABC clearly takes its cue from the theology of Vatican II (e.g., *Ad gentes* 4 and *Gaudium et spes* 22) and specific post-synodal developments, especially those that took place during the papacy of Pope John Paul II.

However, the presence of the Spirit and the Logos are always related to Jesus Christ. Therefore, in the theology of the FABC the other religions always derive their salvific function from the presence

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<sup>6</sup> OTC Methodology 3.1., FAPA 3, 356

of the Triune God. Possible manifestations of the Logos or the Spirit even before the incarnation of the Son of God are related to the Triune God, and as such they do not constitute separate or autonomous economies of salvation. This Christ-centred position is also affirmed as the FABC maintains that in Jesus Christ God's filial relationship with human beings is most clearly visible. The Church's mission is to be a sign and sacrament of this relationship.

In conclusion, it appears that the most clearly visible interpretation of the theology of religions in the documents of the FABC will call that theology "inclusive pluralism", a concept coined by the Jesuit theologian Jacques Dupuis. However, the FABC documents do not use this term, nor do they refer to Dupuis. However, and in spite of the positive *de facto* and *de iure* acceptance of religious pluralism, an inclusive undertone remains in the documents of the FABC.

This dialogical fulfilment paradigm with respect to the positive role of other religions drew the attention of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). In particular, the CDF document *Dominus Iesus* warned of theological development which seemed to compromise the Church's mission in admitting too positive role to the other religion in the economy of salvation. In the opinion of the CDF, the FABC apparently belongs to this group.

Another significant theological hermeneutical principle through which the Asian bishops categorise the positive contribution of Asian contextual realities and the mission of the Church in Asia is to view them through the paradigm of the Paschal mystery. In this approach, Christ's death and resurrection are paradigmatic for an encounter with Asian contextual realities. When the Church and the Gospel it proclaims meet with Asian peoples, its religions, cultures and other contextual realities, something of the old needs to "die", vanish or at least change for the better, and a new needs to be born. This also can be considered in terms of a mathematics of inculturation of the Gospel: when the Gospel and the context meet with one another, the expected end result is not the formula  $A+B=AB$ , but rather  $A+B=C$ . In this the "new", C, is formed from the components of both A and B. In this formula, the new reality to be born from this encounter is comparable to the resurrection of Christ, in which a new category of life was born from the old through the death of the old. In addition, it is important to note that the Paschal Mystery and its purifying work concerns the Church also. There as well exists much imperfection in the Church, so Christ's Paschal Mystery provides a common ground for an encounter between the Church and Asian contextual realities. This Paschal Mystery paradigm also constitutes the model for the important question of inculturation. The present study has shown that the very question of inculturation was discussed more often in the earlier FABC documents than in later documents. One possible reason for this is

a possible theological bias against inculturation on the part of Rome. Thus, in this view a too-heavy emphasis on inculturation and dialogue could imply that the proclamation of the primacy of Jesus Christ might be compromised. Another reason for the disappearance of the word “inculturation” was expressed by the FABC itself as they noted that at the beginning of the new millennium new perspectives were needed and that an integral approach was called for. Nevertheless, the challenge of becoming a truly Asian and a truly Catholic Church has remained, although the terminology used to describe that challenge has changed. The Asian Church is still on its way towards being truly Asian in all respects.

The FABC conversations with Asian socio-political realities, especially the poor, provides the last element in the “triple dialogue” with Asian contextual realities. The reason for welcoming the poor as an Asian reality and as a dialogue partner together with religions and cultures is that the vast majority of Asian people are poor. The immersion into Asian realities cannot neglect the poor. As is the case with the religions and cultures of Asia, the poor also are not merely objects of charitable actions. In the thought of the Asian bishops, the “poor” denotes all those who do not count: the deprived, the outcast and the marginalised, the oppressed and downtrodden. Theologically, the poor are bearers of the Word of God and are vicars of Christ. Indeed, they represent Christ. “The *anawim* are the medium par excellence for a God-encounter.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, in the FABC’s theology, the poor also have a soteriological function. Moreover, the poor call the Church to become not solely the Church for the poor or the Church of the poor but even a poor Church. In addition, being in dialogue with the Asian poor, the poor help the Church to become more truly an Asian Church.

Asian women are one specific group which the Asian bishops discuss under the category of the poor. In 1986 the plight of Asian women was addressed for the first time in the FABC documents. Since then, the questions and challenges of women have appeared in various FABC discussions. The Asian bishops have noted that in Asia women are often ill-treated, exploited and dominated. Some of these problems also concern the Church, which means that the Church is not a sign of the Kingdom of God and an eschatological community. Women’s contribution to the Church is lacking, or completely lost. As a remedy to this, the FABC recommends a fixed quota for women’s participation in all Church organisations and councils. In addition, the bishops provide theological arguments for the betterment of the role of women in the Church; the Church ought to follow the model of Jesus, who emptied himself to be in solidarity with those who do not count, including women. Another argument for the betterment of the position of women in Asia is to be found in the

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<sup>7</sup> OTC, Methodology 3.2.4.4., FAPA 3, 360.

long traditions of other Asian religions, for example in feminist thought in Buddhism and Confucianism. The FABC argues that such traditions contain elements for improving the acceptance of women. Thus, regarding as well the question about the plight of women, the FABC welcomes the sources of other religions as material for their theological reflection.

The foregoing discussion has shown that the Asian bishops accept the Asian religious, cultural and socio-political realities in a predominantly positive manner. In light of this predominantly positive acceptance, the present study raises the question about possible critical appraisal of these Asian realities. In theological terms, the study examined the question of sin with regard to Asian contextual realities. One result of this study is the observation that the FABC often discusses the concept of sin in connection with the ministry of Jesus. This view describes Jesus as a liberator in whose ministry the demons flee and sinners are liberated. With respect to the concept of liberation, the FABC emphasises the importance of prayer in achieving liberation, conversion of heart and renewal of societal structures. The present study also examined the question of whether or not the FABC's theology represents a liberation theology. The present study argues that Latin America liberation theologies appear to have contributed to the emergence of Asian liberation theologies, including that of the FABC. However, the present study also identifies several differences between the theologies that have emerged on both continents; the contexts are different, consequently the outcome is different. The FABC's theology is influenced by Asia's realities, especially by Asian religions and Asia's organic and harmonious worldview. Thus, also looked at from this particular viewpoint, the contextual theology of the FABC seeks to be a genuinely Asian theology. This fits with the FABC's clarion call for the Asian churches to find their own identity.

The last questions that this study examined concerns the ecclesiology and theological methodology of the FABC. A coherent picture predominantly in line with previous themes emerges in the present study's discussion of the FABC's ecclesiology and methodology as well. The FABC's ecclesiology was discussed under the title "Local Church in service of Asian peoples" with special reference to the theme of "searching for Asian faces of Jesus". These titles bring to the fore questions having to do with the Church's mission. This chapter argues that the term "face" implies a rich theology. The FABC searches for an Asian face of Jesus, and consequently also an Asian face of the Church. "An Asian face" is a parallel expression for the Asian approach to theology. Thus, Asianness as a crosscutting theme is also present in the ecclesiological definitions of the Asian bishops. In addition, in their discussion of the Asian face of Jesus, the FABC also inevitably touches upon

Christological questions. On this particular question, the FABC recognises the importance of the traditional theological loci, Sacred Scripture and Tradition, but at the same time seeks to present Jesus in an Asian way. In this pursuit, the FABC calls for having a “Third Look” at Jesus. By this the bishops suggest looking at Jesus through the eyes of the poor peoples of Asia. The “Third Look” is different from “the first” and “the second look”; the first refers to looking at Jesus through his own eyes and the second refers to the way in which Greco-Roman and western eyes have understood Jesus. Thus, the Third Look expresses the FABC’s intention to discern Asian faces of Jesus in Asia’s cultural, religious and social contexts. Therefore, in this particular question as well the FABC articulates its theological vision through Asian contextual realities.

The “Third Look” and Asian faces of Jesus are expressed by means of images which arguably resonate with the Asian peoples’ vision of life. The FABC wishes to tell “the story of Jesus” in Asia by employing “Asian-tasting” images: e.g., friend of God, bringer of harmony, lover of the poor, healer and liberator, a great Storyteller, God’s love story in flesh, the kenotic Jesus, who pitches his tent among us. The Federation employs these images without rejecting the traditional Christological formulations, but the bishops seem to have chosen a “Christology from below” approach for the sake of the Church’s mission in Asia. The mission in Asia calls for Asian-compatible expressions. The present study also argues that the FABC’s choice of the above-mentioned images of Jesus signifies more than merely “putting on a mask” or “decorating” the Christian message with some ingredients with an Asian “flavour” in order to keep the kernel of the Gospel intact. In the thought of the Asian bishops, assuming an Asian face extends deeper into the Asian cultural stratum.

An Asian face of Jesus also has ecclesiological consequences: like Jesus, like the Church. Through the Church, the Asian face of Jesus must shine forth in Asia. The face of the Church must be the face of love, joy, and hope. The Asian bishops call this “a new way of being the Church in Asia”, which also invites the Church to be the sacrament of communion and harmony with God and humanity.

For the sake of its mission, the FABC also calls the Church to make structural changes: to let go of the image of power, pomp and authoritarianism. The authorities of the Church are called on to exercise servanthood instead of domination. The FABC documents also recommend that the structures of the Church become more communal rather than institutional. Another aspect of the FABC’s ecclesiological vision is expressed in its view of “a new way of being Church” in Asia. This emphasis no longer places the Church and its expansion at the centre; instead the Kingdom of God becomes the centre of the Christian life. The Church’s humble role is to be a sign and



sacrament and a seed of the Kingdom. Nevertheless, the FABC argues that the Church's mission must keep Christ at the centre of its proclamation, behaviour and relationships. This particular point led us to ask the question of what kind of mission paradigm appears in the documents of the FABC. The bishops convincingly argue that the Church cannot compromise its missionary task; they see Jesus as the most precious gift that the Church can give. At the same time, the bishops still admit that the Church is not the sole possessor of truth and the possessor of the Kingdom. The Church must be in service of the coming of the Kingdom while at the same time it accepts the followers of other religions as co-pilgrims. The present study argues that the Asian Catholic bishops' solution to the missionary mandate and challenge can be described as *mission ad gentes inter gentes et cum gentibus*. The Asian pilgrim Church holds firm to the missionary mandate given to it by Christ, but at the same time it also welcomes other religions and their adherents as fellow pilgrims and co-workers for the advancement of the Kingdom. This solution manages to preserve the centrality of the Gospel and Christ while making space for a genuinely Asian approach: a dialogical, harmonious and complementary approach. In the FABC's view, this approach is suitable to the needs of the times and contexts of Asia and it also responds in an Asian manner to the theological delineations of Vatican II.

The last topic present study discusses is the FABC's theological methodology. All the topics discussed above direct the way in which the Asian bishops develop their theological methodology. The most important finding of the present study, with respect to the FABC theological methodology, is the presentation in the FABC documents of the pastoral cycle, or, Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA). The FABC argues that this approach is Asian in a way that takes into account the Asian pluralism of Asian religions and societies. The AsIPA is also integral with regard to content, collaboration and co-ordination. Third, the AsIPA is pastoral, and emphasises the participation of the entire community. Finally, the AsIPA is also a process which includes the community at the grassroots level to help them realise their common mission and social responsibility. We can see that this approach is primarily inductive: contextual realities provide important material for theological reflection. However, this process does not neglect the teaching of the Church; faith reflection and discernment come after immersion in the realities of everyday life reality and its analysis. Moreover, the primary place of this reflection is a local Christian Church which operates under the leadership of the bishop. Finally, it is important to note the significance of the term "cycle"; the process needs to be done continuously.

Another method the Asian bishops introduce is a "double baptism" in accordance with the model of Jesus' own baptisms. Jesus' first baptism is his water baptism in the river Jordan, and the second is

his baptism by blood at Calvary. For the FABC, these two baptisms signify Jesus' immersion into and acceptance of God's option for the poor and Jesus's own immersion into the struggles and suffering of the poor.

The FABC argues that this "double baptism" is important for the Church in order for it to become meaningful for the peoples of Asia; for example, the Church should respond to dehumanising situations in societies. Following in the footsteps of Jesus, the Church should help in bringing liberation, especially to the poor. In addition, the example of Jesus crossing to the "other side" of different borders challenges the Church to take a risk in going to the core of the experience of other religions and other traditions.

Finally, the FABC proposes an Asian approach to the area of language as well. The bishops argue that an Asian way is holistic rather than purely rationalistic. This approach calls for experiential theological language utilising stories, allegories and parables. In addition, the Federation suggests symbolic theology as a means suitable in Asia. In symbolic theology, language is personal, experiential, parabolic, narrative and imaginative. The FABC holds that theological language cannot be merely objective or subjective. It must always be personal. With regard to the symbolic approach, the FABC argues that symbols bear and contain the reality they symbolise; they mediate an experience of the Transcendent because they are open to the Absolute Mystery. To summarise, in their theological methodological approach as well the Asian bishops appear to build their theology on the basis of an Asian framework. They obviously do this with the firm intention of serving their desire that the Asian churches find their own truly Asian and Catholic identity in Asia.

In conclusion, we can ask where the FABC stands now, more than 40 years since its foundation. This 2011 document of the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) of the FABC aptly summarises the understanding to which the Asian bishops have arrived after a long journey of searching for viable ways of creating a Catholic theology compatible with Asia. This passage merits citation in full:

Another challenge arising ...is that new theoretical paradigms articulated to help the Asian Christian understand and confront the multi-religious reality which are articulated present both possibilities and frequently involve certain tentativeness. Often what are involved are issues of precomprehension, perspective, method and hermeneutics, and not specific points of theological interpretation and application of an existing paradigm. New paradigms are as yet untested and cannot be automatically endorsed. It is to be remembered that what are often at stake here are not merely truths peripheral to the Catholic self-understanding, but rather truths which pertain to the core of the faith, as for example, the universal salvific will of God, the unique mediation of Jesus Christ, the action of the Holy Spirit and the instrumentality of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation. On the other hand, it would not

be fair to reject a new paradigm, unless it is alien to the community experience and its articulation. The evaluation then, in its turn, will be based on the inner coherence and adequacy of the particular paradigm to reflect in its own categories the experience which the old paradigm had striven to understand and formulate. This testing, refinement and authentication obviously has to be an ecclesial task in which the Magisterium plays an essential role.<sup>8</sup>

The OTC recognises that there are new paradigms which need to be tested. However, they cannot always be embraced as such. The FABC theologians are well aware that the matters at stake here are truths that pertain to the core of the faith, such as “the universal salvific will of God, the unique mediation of Jesus Christ, the action of the Holy Spirit and the instrumentality of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation.” On the other hand, however, the OTC sees the need for a new paradigm for interpreting these core truths of the faith. The assessment of new paradigms must be based on their “inner coherence and adequacy” with the old paradigms. In other words, new paradigms have to be compatible with a particular community and its formulations and, at the same time, be capable of reflecting and expressing the “truths” expressed earlier in the old paradigms. This evaluation calls for assessment, refinement, testing, and authentication in which the Church’s magisterium plays a pivotal role.

Thus, the Asian Catholic theologians willingly submit their new theological paradigms necessary for successful theological expression of the truth to the magisterium. At the same time, however, they challenge and kindly urge the magisterium to take an active role in exploring the new paradigms suggested by the Asian Church. Furthermore, the FABC is well aware that the matters at stake here are delicate. However, they call for a changed mindset, especially with regard to the question of the plurality of religions. This requires both loyalty to one’s own religious experience and respect for the faith of another. This attitude and approach, and the call for new paradigms, arise from the “Wayfaring dimension” of Asian theology. As I have argued throughout this study, this “Wayfaring dimension” is a meaningful way of understanding the entire theological program of the FABC from the time its inception onwards. The OTC calls this “Wayfaring Theology” or “wayfaring” dimension of “all Catholic articulation of the faith” [which] “is significantly present in Asian theology.” Furthermore, this dimension is a “process [which] accompanies Asian Catholic believers during their pilgrimage on earth, helping them decipher the significance of God’s presence in their midst.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> OTC 2011, 40. FABC Papers 133.

<sup>9</sup> OTC 2011, 39. FABC Papers 133.

This understanding leads the FABC to a programmatic vision of their vision in Asia. The following passage written in 2002 by the Symposium on Evangelization of the Office of Evangelization (OE) captures this vision:

The Church in Asia is inspired by the Spirit to listen again and again to the Word incarnate in Jesus. We are impelled to proclaim the Good News of Jesus - evangelium. Deep in our hearts is the flame of the Word (cf. Jer. 20:9) and of our faith in love of the eternal Word incarnate who is Jesus. We cannot hold this flame back. We have to speak of Jesus to others, share him with others, love and serve others the way he did. As Church this is our identity, our reason for being, our inherent mission. We have to proclaim him as the Son of God, the unique Saviour of the world, the One who beyond human dreams fulfils the deepest yearnings of the Asian heart. We are convinced that the Good News of Jesus that we bear is our most precious gift to Asia. Jesus is infinitely more than just the meaning of all human existence, its sufferings, joys and hopes. Indeed, to share him as a gift is to help our brothers and sisters in Asia to respond to the perennial central concerns of humanity: sin, forgiveness, justice, truth, peace, freedom, integrity, love. But Jesus is even more. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. To share him with others is the ultimate reason for all our pastoral activity. This mission is a faith imperative. We shall do this in season and out of season as God wills.<sup>10</sup>

This text is noteworthy for the following reasons: (a) it is a relatively recent document (2002) and thus reflects a certain point of arrival in the history of the Federation; and (b) the document was written as a response to Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999). The history of the FABC, spanning many decades, has included much theological reflection and work. Over the years, the FABC adopted an approach best described as a process. The above document of the Symposium of Evangelization represents a certain point of arrival in this process. This document delineates some of the most important results of this long process and also captures the then-current vision and mission of the Catholic Church in Asia. Also, as a response to the papal exhortation, the text shows the bishops' thought in relation to the teaching of the magisterium. During the process for the preparation of the Asian Synod, and in the Synod itself, the Asian bishops expressed their voices with boldness (*parrhesia*)<sup>11</sup>, calling Rome to greater trust in the local episcopal synods. Here, the bishops appear to adhere to the papal exhortation. Nevertheless, they boldly call for the right to interpret the faith and proclaim the Gospel in an Asian-compatible manner.

The Church confesses and proclaims Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, while at the same time not losing sight of the Asian way of life and the Asian way of thinking: "In the Asian way of

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<sup>10</sup> OE 4, FAPA 4, 250.

<sup>11</sup> "What was new is not what the Asian bishops said but *that* they said it and *how* they said it at the synod. What they said had been said, at length and with power and depth, for almost thirty years, ever since the foundation of the FABC in 1972, in its numerous plenary assemblies and in the documents of its several institutes. But at the synod, they said it again, *to the whole Church*, and with surprising *boldness* and refreshing *candor*, with what the New Testament calls *parrhesia*." Phan 2002, 251.

life and thinking, one would see an emphasis on Asians as seekers of the way rather than as merely seekers of truth.” Living according to this paradigm, the Asian Church will discover its identity as a truly Catholic and a truly Asian Church.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ABM	Asian Bishops' Meeting
ALF	Asian Liturgy Forum
AsIPA	Asian Integral Pastoral Approach
BIRA	Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Dialogue
CDF	Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith
DI	Dominus Iesus
DV	Dei Verbum
EN	Evangelii Nuntiandi
ES	Ecclesiam Suam
FABC 1-11	Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Plenary Assemblies 1-11
FAPA 1	For All the Peoples of Asia, volume 1.
FAPA 2	For All the Peoples of Asia, volume 2
FAPA 3	For All the Peoples of Asia, volume 3
FAPA 4	For All the Peoples of Asia, volume 4
FAPA 5	For All the Peoples of Asia, volume 5
FEISA	First Programme of Faith Encounters in Social Action
FIRA	Formation Institute for Religious Affairs
FR	Fides et Ratio
GS	Gaudium et Spes
NA	Nostra Aetate
OC	Office of Clergy
OCL	Office of Consecrated Life
OE	Office of Evangelization
OEIA	Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs
OESC	Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy
OHD	Office of Human Development
OL	Office of Laity
OSC	Office of Social Communication
OTC	Office of Theological Concerns
RM	Redemptoris Missio
SC	Sacrosanctum Concilium
TAC	Theological Advisory Commission

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